

THEOLOGY

One Bite at a Time



“HESED” – The Lovingkindness of God

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INTRODUCTION

What was the primal driver of the Creation? The word *Primal* is defined by Webster as *first in time; original and first in importance*. When we think about the “Creative Event” we think in terms of great power and the expending of terrific energy – big bangs, super novas and black holes. We can of course say that God is primal but this begs the question, what motivates God to create the universe? And is this therefore the real primal force in the universe?

This paper will explore the word, concept and theology of *hesed* – the lovingkindness of God. The word *hesed* is not just a Hebrew word to be translated by the exegete as simply lovingkindness or mercy – it is in fact an attribute of God. The *hesed* of God is a divine characteristic and is at the center of why God acts as He does in real space and time.

The Biblical presentation of this word however, is not limited to defining only one attribute of God. The Bible also reveals that *hesed* is an attribute that we, as children of God possess and are commanded by God to emulate and develop. Being made in God’s image, we too can emulate the divine attribute of *hesed*.

While the idea of lovingkindness and mercy may seem to be only that of positive emotion, it will be demonstrated that God’s lovingkindness is a two-edged sword. *Hesed* can also be a mechanism of judgment and accountability before God. People can be described as having the gift of *hesed* or having “*no hesed*,” or no lovingkindness.

The task of writing (or reading for that matter), a twenty five page paper about a single Hebrew word may appear at first, arduous and potentially boring. Boring perhaps, until we begin to appreciate what this word means in terms of Biblical theology and the life of Believers. Given the importance of this word it then becomes obvious that twenty five pages will not be enough.

This paper will also include a study of specific usage of the word along with similar Hebrew words and concepts. We will also briefly survey certain key books of the Bible which shed much light on the theology of *hesed* and what our response to it must be.

Because *hesed* is both a Hebrew word and more importantly a Jewish theological concept, this paper will review some of the Hebraic writings concerning the lovingkindness of God found in the Talmud and present day Jewish scholarship.

Hesed is found approximate 250 times in the Hebrew Bible, with approximately 125 appearances in the Psalms alone. And while the word is not identified specifically as *hesed* in the Greek NT, the OT concept of lovingkindness, mercy and selfless giving can be said to be the very heart of the NT Gospel. “*For God so loved the world that He gave...*” (Jn 3:16).

Hesed In The Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth is a special book for Christians. From the union of Ruth and Boaz we trace the lineage of our Lord Jesus from His father David. Ruth is one of only four women mentioned in the lineage of Jesus (Mt 1:5). And it is in this wonderful book Christians discover some of the most remarkable Types found in the Bible. Boaz - the Kinsman Redeemer; Ruth, the Gentile, as a type of the Bride of Christ (Church); Naomi as a type of Israel, returning to her land and her inheritance. And as a love story, Ruth has been a source of comfort and joy to many. So for the Christians, there are many reasons the book of Ruth is included in the Canon.

This question however, should also be asked of the Jews who canonized the book without the realization of the coming of Jesus. Why did the Hebrew Sages prior to 300 BC include the book of Ruth in their Cannon? Why then was it written?

The Sages explain:

“Were it not for some unique trait found in the life of Ruth which provided a pattern for universal emulation, all else derived from Ruth could preferably have been taught elsewhere. Israel never lacked Torah scholars to teach us the various laws of the Torah or its modes of conduct, and thus we do not have to turn to converts [i.e. Ruth] to teach us those laws. Ruth did possess one trait, however which Israel entirely lacked at that time... Ruth exemplified the attribute of *chesed* – lovingkindness.”¹

Eliyahu Kitov goes on to explain that because of this trait revealed in Ruth, (during the times of the Judges), the children of Israel as a nation were again able to regain this most important divine attribute which would eventually be passed down to King David.² Thus it is seen in the book of Ruth that “lovingkindness,” (*hesed*), is that which helps define the true Child of God. The book of Ruth, according to Jewish tradition, was canonized to “teach the reward for those who perform acts of lovingkindness.”³

¹ E. Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage* (Jerusalem, Israel, Feldheim, 1968) 819

² Ibid., 819

³ Ibid., 819

According to the Sages, Ruth uniquely possessed the attribute of *hesed* which was hidden or lost to Israel during the times of the Judges. “*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*” (Judges 21:25).⁴ How then did Ruth, a Moabitess, come by this divine trait which was originally given by God to the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? The answer to this mystery is not found in the Holy Bible. However the Talmudic explanation is of value and interest because it helps clarify the theology of *hesed* which is found in both the OT and NT.

Simply put, the Sages held that Ruth was a direct descendent of Abraham by way of Lot. They teach that Ruth was the daughter of Eglon and the granddaughter of Balak who were direct descendents of Moab – the son of Lot and nephew of Abraham. Thus Ruth was an inheritor of the seed of lovingkindness which Abraham planted in Lot. Kitov states; “This trait [the *hesed of Abraham*] remained dormant for some seven hundred years – surviving, though it passed through all types of refuse and contamination until its light burst forth in Ruth.”⁵

Abraham was the elected recipient of God’s lovingkindness and he set about teaching and “planting” it in all he could. In the case of Abraham, his lovingkindness was exemplified in his faith which enabled him to step out and enter into the unknown with acts of self-sacrifice and obedience to God’s commands.

⁴ Kitov is quick to point out that the Sages did not say that lovingkindness had departed from all of the people of Israel. The individual trait of lovingkindness is always present in some individuals. But Kitov does state that lovingkindness had departed from the national leadership and the people as a whole

⁵ Ibid., 826, Kitov does an excellent job in presenting this perspective on Ruth’s background by tracing the attribute of *hesed* from Abraham to Lot, to Judah, and finally to Elimelech. Elimelech abandoned his people in their time of need and thus was struck down by God. With the coming of Ruth and Boaz, the trait of *hesed* returned to Bethlehem and to the royal line which culminated in the birth of King David.

Ruth's Lovingkindness to Naomi - Hesed, is not simply the emotion of loving someone, nor is it human compassion or even charity. There is no doubt Ruth was kind and compassionate towards Naomi. These are understood and not unique in a loving and healthy relationship between a mother and daughter in-law. Ruth was indeed a good daughter in-law. So what were the acts of divine *hesed* found in Ruth which were so unique?

The first act of divine *hesed* displayed by Ruth was to humble herself for the sake of one weaker than her. Ruth deliberately made herself of “no-account” to lift up and redeem Naomi, (i.e. to restore Naomi to her inheritance). Ruth could have stayed in the land of Moab, married and had children, (1:11-15), this is evident. What was less evident is that life in Bethlehem for Ruth promised servitude, widowhood – bereft of legal marriage and children. This because of the prohibition against a Moabite being permitted into the assembly of Israel (Deut 23:8).

Servitude and submission is what awaited Ruth, should she condescend and go to Bethlehem. Ruth's kindness was one of total self-sacrifice. She was not only willing “to die” for Naomi, but willing to suffer loss of status and privilege when she was in no way obligated to do so. Theologically, the one in power gives up that power for the sake of one weaker.

This kind of total submission solely for the sake of another is the divine trait we see in the work of Christ and the theology of Kenosis.⁶

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” (Phil 2:5-8)

⁶ Recognizing the ongoing debate surrounding the many theories of Kenosis theology, I am using the term only with reference to the “self-limiting” of Jesus as the Son of God becoming incarnate. Christ Jesus becomes a man, (i.e. lower than His previous state), for the sole benefit of His people. In a similar manner, but on a human level, Ruth did likewise for Naomi. Ruth was a citizen of Moab, perhaps royalty, but she “self-limited” her status, and her future to become less than an Israelite.

For an excellent and brief summary of the various theories of Kenosis theology see, W. Elwell, ed, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.(Grand Rapids, MI, Baker 2001), 651-652

Ruth's voluntary self-sacrifice for the benefit of another was her first act of divine lovingkindness. Ruth veiled or self-limited herself by joining with Naomi, and this was typical of what Christ did in coming down from heaven.⁷ It was in effect, "royalty" which was voluntarily concealed and then laid down in order to elevate or redeem another.

Ruth's Lovingkindness to Boaz - Another act of *hesed* which Ruth displayed was described in the words of Boaz: "*Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter! For you have shown more kindness [hesed] at the end than at the beginning, in that you did not go after young men, whether poor or rich.*" (Ruth 3:9).

It would be simplistic and inappropriate to say that Ruth married Boaz because of his money or status. If we as believers give credence to doctrine concerning the "Providence of God," then we must look for the guiding hand of God in the actions of Ruth and Boaz. What is accomplished, theologically, by the union of Ruth and Boaz? Ruth makes the statement "...*your people shall be my people, and your God, my God...*" (1:16b). These are more than just words of fidelity. In effect Ruth is submitting herself to the Assembly of Israel – the Law of Moses and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As stated above, Ruth chose to submit herself to a loss of status under the Levitical Law by going to Bethlehem in order to be with Naomi.

Her kindness is that she is again putting the needs of others above her own. By his words, Boaz is telling us that Ruth had choices. She might have had personal security in a relationship with a gentile man. But she obeyed the words of Naomi and submitted to her authority in the choosing of Boaz. In her plea for Boaz to fulfill his role as a kinsman-redeemer, Ruth is offering to marry within the tribe of Judah thus preserving the name and inheritance of her deceased husband, i.e. showing kindness to the dead.

⁷ I am not here insisting that Ruth is a formal "type" of Christ, more to the point; her act of sacrificial loving-kindness (*hesed*) to Naomi is of the same nature that Jesus showed to the entire creation.

Ruth is also making arrangements for the future well being of Naomi, in that Naomi's inheritance is being redeemed (4:5-10). Finally, she is offering to give Boaz, (an older man) children in order to maintain his line and help the nation of Israel rebuild (4:11-12), as provided for in the plan and providence of God.⁸ Ruth could have been content with a life of humility and submission. However, she recognized the critical role she was to play in helping Naomi, Boaz and the nation of Israel. She could have gone "after young men, poor or rich." And perhaps have had a long and secure marriage, in contrast to her previous marriage. Her lovingkindness in cooperating with the plan of God by marrying the older Boaz benefited not just Naomi and Boaz but also the nation of Israel and the rest of humanity through Jesus.

It must be stressed that Ruth was under no obligation to perform her acts of mercy or lovingkindness – or put another way Ruth "was not under the Law." She chose to place herself under the yoke of the Law in order to help those who did not have a claim upon her.

Of greatest importance is that Ruth showed lovingkindness to God. She willingly helped God's people and cooperated with God's plan for a Messiah. Ruth then is typical of another woman who demonstrated *hesed* by helping God's plan for a Messiah – Mary, mother of Jesus.

⁸ To the skeptic this whole affair might be viewed as an opportunistic ploy on the part of Ruth and Naomi. However, Ruth was a Moabitess and a Moabite was forbidden to join the assembly. By strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 23:3 the descendents of a union between a Moabite and a Jew would be excluded from the Assembly "forever." This union would therefore jeopardize the inheritance of Boaz – as the "Nearer Kinsman" pointed out; "And the close relative said, 'I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I ruin my own inheritance. You redeem my right of redemption for yourself, for I cannot redeem it'" (Ruth 2:6). How then could Boaz marry Ruth and not lose his inheritance? Surely Naomi and Boaz were aware of this Law. So why did they proceed?

It is here that one of the more interesting explanations is given by the ancient Sages of Israel. In essence the Sages state that in deliberating the unique case of Ruth and Boaz, the ruling Sanhedrin at that time, was under the guidance of God who had a plan to provide Israel with a Messiah and King, i.e. David. Therefore with respect to the generation of Boaz, "God illuminated the eyes of the Sages who elucidated this halachah, [a law or ruling] for it was then that it had practical application. The community of Israel waited for Ruth to *return from the fields of Moab* so that the light of Mashiah might be revealed through her." The halachah they are referring to was a special interpretation that was unique to Ruth's case. "It was only in the generation of Boaz and Ruth that the question arose. It was then that the Sages sat and concluded that the Torah spoke of an Ammonite and not an "Ammonitess," of a Moabite and not a "Moabitess." This in effect ruled that the Law of Deuteronomy 23:3 applied only to male Moabites and not females. Therefore Boaz was permitted to marry Ruth without ruining his inheritance. Kitov states this ruling was never applied before or after Ruth and Boaz. It applied only to this couple and no others because God made an exception to His Law so that His plan for a Messiah could be carried out. E. Kitov, *The Book of Our Heritage* (Jerusalem, Israel, Feldheim, 1968) 830-832

Hesed in the Psalms

The value which we place upon *hesed*, as recipients of God's loyal love, is all too often understated and under appreciated. But there are numerous passages, (greater than 65), in the Psalms which demonstrate the value of His lovingkindness and what our proper response to His loyal love should be; *"How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Your wings."* (Ps 36:7). The Psalmist explains the tangible value and results of God's lovingkindness as he continues; *"They are abundantly satisfied with the fullness of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your pleasures, For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light."* (36:7). The Psalmist recognizes this quality of lovingkindness in Yahweh and praises Him for it. *"Because thy lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise Thee."* (63:3).

Many of the Psalms extol God's lovingkindness by praising Him for it; *"I will love You with my whole heart; before the gods I will sing praises to you. I will worship toward Your holy temple, and praise your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth."* (138:1-2). In this passage the Psalmist is not just praising God before men, but to the heavens and those who dwell in them. *"before the gods I will sing praises to you."* (138:1b). The word translated as "gods" is *elohim*, i.e. the angelic hosts (plural), and as such it is appropriate to conclude that God's *hesed* is on display as a witness to all creation, even those who dwell in heaven.

It is also exciting to read the Psalmist who informs us that the quality of *hesed* is not only to be found in Yahweh but, with joy, the Psalmist reminds the reader that Yahweh gives that very same quality to His people. *"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits... Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies."* (103:2,4).

John Feinberg points out that while many of references in the Psalms extol God's lovingkindness, most of the Psalms concerning God's *hesed* take the form of a plea to God, to both grant and then continue His gift; "*Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord: Let thy lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me.*" (Ps 40:11) KJV.

A critical point in Feinberg's treatment of *hesed* includes the scriptures which "records God expressing his desire to be lovingkind or to continue showing forth his lovingkindness."⁹ Feinberg's point is critical because it reveals the character of the God of the OT as the one who desires to give of himself to his people first, and then to perpetuate his *hesed* even though his people do not reciprocate. "What an encouragement to God's people, especially those in need, to know that God remains steady to his loyal love!"¹⁰

A common theme in the Psalms is to connect God's mercy with salvation. "*Return, O Lord, deliver me! Oh, save me for Your mercies' sake!*" (6:4). Salvation here comes in the form of physical salvation. Later, the Psalmist pleads for mercy with respect to his physical salvation, but also pleads for his soul. "*O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled.*" (6:2b-3).

The book of Psalms makes it clear that the salvation of God is rooted in His mercy; God's Lovingkindness, (i.e. His *hesed*). In the following section, *hesed* as a demonstration and description of God's mercy will be explored in greater detail.

What can be said of the book of Psalms regarding this word study is that this book holds a treasure trove of references concerning lovingkindness. The Psalmist gives us abundant insights into God's character and His heart.

⁹ J. Feinberg, *No One Like Him, The Doctrine of God*. (Wheaton, Ill, Crossways 2001) 369

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 370

Hesed in the Book of Hosea

“In no prophet is the love of God more clearly demarcated and illustrated than in Hosea. His marital experience was the key to both his ministry and his theology. It was the picture of the holiness of God righteously standing firm while the heart of God tenderly loved that which was utterly abhorrent.” Walter Kaiser¹¹

“No Hesed!” - The husband, who must face the fact that his wife does not love or trust him, endures a cut that does not heal. It is an open wound. This loss of trust says to the husband that what he has provided for his beloved is insufficient. Even worse, she does not acknowledge that her provision came from him at all, but another. The husband may earn the trust and respect of others, even kings, but if his wife does not trust him, the trust of Kings is a poor second.

In the second chapter of Hosea, God illustrates the loss of *hesed*, (i.e. loyal love) of His beloved who has given credit to others for what she, in reality, has obtained from God. Her food, home, and security – even her very life were all a result of God’s lovingkindness. But Israel decided to believe a lie. The lie... that what she had came from false gods; *“For she did not know that I gave her grain, new wine and oil and multiplied her silver and gold.”* (Hos 2:8)

Israel gave herself, her adoration, her intimacy and her vitality to other gods – other “husbands,” giving them credit for what Yahweh had done. *“She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, and went after her lovers: But Me she forgot.”* (2:13b).

Israel came to think of the God of Abraham as an irrelevant, boring relic and ignored Him altogether. God’s charge against Israel in the first part of chapter two described the severity of Israel’s offense, personified as the unfaithful “wife of God” (2:16-20). This personification of a spousal relationship gives us a unique insight into the kind and degree of pain and suffering Israel caused the God of the universe.

¹¹ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1978) 197 – Kaiser renders the word *hesed* as “loyal love” which incorporates the concept of covenantal love, which in the case of Hosea seems to be very appropriate.

It is astounding that God did not just do away with His “wife.” Just leave her to her lie, remove her support permanently and let her die! This might be the “human” reaction. But God did not do this (11:8-10). Instead, He removed Israel’s support, in severe yet measured degrees, even unto physical death – for two distinct purposes.

The first purpose was to show Israel and her children the injustice of her actions and her willful ignorance. The second was to “allure” her back to a loving relationship that God desired – a relationship that benefits both God and His betrothed (2:14-21).

Understanding that there is deliberate purpose behind God’s loss, chastening and ultimate redemption of His “wife,” is critical if we are to fully appreciate the sacrifice of God’s love. It is also critical that we understand that this process is under His deliberate and sovereign control. The contrasting of God’s loving-kindness with the lack of this trait in His people is staggering!

“There is no truth or mercy (hesed) or knowledge of God in the land.” (4:1b). Indeed Israel had no lovingkindness. The consequences of this lack of mercy affected not only Israel but the very land and all those who lived there. *“Therefore the land will mourn; and everyone who dwells there will waste away with the beast of the field and the birds of the air; even the fish of sea will be taken away.”* (4:3)

This frightening picture portrays the fact that when God’s people do not practice mercy and lovingkindness the entire creation suffers. Adam was God’s steward of His creation – the physical manifestation of His image on earth. But Adam’s fall cursed the very ground, and because of him the entire creation “groans,” (Rom 8:22). As with Adam, God’s children have a tremendous effect upon those around them – either to practice God’s *hesed* or withhold it.

Reflection on Hosea

Father we have fallen, I have fallen...and died.

Hosea gave us your word concerning our disloyalty to you, and to your precepts. We learned of your lovingkindness through precepts, line-by-line. We knew better, yet we became as spoiled children and would not keep that which we learned and knew to be the truth. So bit by bit we forsook those precepts and discipline which gave us strength, security and purpose.

We turned from you – slowly at first, as one creeping closer to the edge of a great cliff, desiring to look into an abyss, which you had forbidden. You had forbidden it because you knew that there was great danger to us. Our decent was easy and pleasurable. Your precepts, which restrained us, we strained against. As we pulled against you we began to desire the decent. We became annoyed with your restraints until we began to see your precepts as bonds and chains which you had unfairly placed upon us.

We caused you pain, your heart churned within you. We roused your anger and deserved your wrath, yet you would not leave us because, unlike us, you had not lost your loyal love. You suffered for that.

We struggled to be free of you so much that we became maddened by the effort. We pulled against your strong embrace and desired to fling ourselves over the cliff. We encouraged and helped others to fight against you and rejoiced as they plunged over the edge into the darkness. We considered only the exhilaration of the leap and not the pain of the cruel bottom. We pulled and pulled against you, we became your enemies in our tearing against your restraining, loving hand... and then, you let go and I died.

Hesed beyond death

To study about God's loyal love in Hosea is to face a disturbing paradox. God told Hosea; *"When Ephraim spoke trembling, he exalted himself in Israel; but when he offended through Baal worship, he died."* (13:1). Israel had sinned and rebelled against God and so she died. It is at first easy to say that this is an allegorical statement referring to spiritual death. But Israel died both physically and spiritually. *"Samaria is held guilty, for she has rebelled against her God. They shall fall by the sword, their infants shall be dashed to pieces, and their women with child ripped open."* (13:16).

It would be simplistic and I believe inappropriate to infer that God's Word regarding this matter was only a "temporary condition," as if to say that God really did not mean that He would actually kill His beloved. Yet because of the severity of Israel's sins, described so vividly and with such force, we must accept the fact that God did indeed kill the ones He loved – Israel died and she is still dead. And so the paradox is faced – God kills the ones He loves. And this same paradox we face today as Christians with respect to our being accountable for our actions.

The paradox is lifted however when we understand that God's covenantal love, (*hesed*) extends beyond physical and spiritual death. As humans, we are forced to see death as final. The message of the Gospel does not avoid death. Death will come to all because of sin. Platonic concepts of the hereafter are not Biblical. We do not simply die physically and are then revived as non-corporeal spirits. The very idea of resurrection requires that physical and spiritual death occur – we are not just asleep. It is through God's power and because of His lovingkindness that God resolves the paradox. *"I will ransom them from the power of the grave. I will redeem them from death." O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction!"* (13:14).

God's covenantal and loyal love does not preclude God's judgment. We are to be held accountable for our sins. The lovingkindness and mercy of God reverses the condemnation brought on by the betrayal and disobedience of those He loves.

Hesed as “Mercy”

It is appropriate that the greatest use of the word *hesed* in the Bible is translated as “mercy” – some one hundred and thirty times while “lovingkindness” is used only thirty times. In each instance mercy (*hesed*) is both experienced and exercised. It is experienced by the person who can make no claim upon the one exercising mercy. The one who is exercising mercy has the other in his power or has some degree of authority over him.¹²

In this way God shows mercy toward human beings who are all ultimately within His power. That is to say, God is under no obligation, with reference to our behavior, to exercise actions of mercy upon us. This attribute of God is a central component of His being, one which we are to emulate.

“From a theological perspective the characteristic of mercy is rooted in God and experienced in relation to God, from whom it may be acquired as Christian virtue and exercised in relation to fellow human beings. In the Bible a variety of Hebrew and Greek words are used which fall within the general and semantic range of the English word “mercy.” They include such terms as “lovingkindness” (Heb. *hesed*), “to be merciful” (Heb. *hānan*), “to have compassion” (Heb. *riham*), and “grace” (Gr. *charis*).”¹³

The divine trait of showing mercy (*hesed*) is a trait that can be learned and practiced by every human. It was commanded by Jesus when He contrasted the worth of piety and religious practice, (that of the Pharisees), with true compassion upon sinners desperately in need of salvation. “*But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.*” (Mt 9:13) NKJV. Here Jesus, by quoting Hosea 6:6, makes it clear that God will hold all men accountable for not using this powerful gift and ability to grant mercy, which they have been given by God as a foundation of their stewardship as children of God.

¹² This is a brief summary of P.C. Craigie’s excellent article concerning mercy. W. Elwell, ed, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker 2001), 761

¹³ *Ibid.*, 761

When viewed as a stewardship granted by God, *hesed*, (the ability to show mercy), can be seen as a power granted to kings and rulers. God will hold those who have the power to be merciful to a higher standard.

God is witnessed to the entire world through the actions of His anointed people. In the OT, God left no doubt that those who act in His name, while in positions of authority, must show justice, mercy and compassion in their leadership or suffer His displeasure and judgment.

“God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges the gods. How long will you judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked. They do not know, nor do they understand; they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are unstable. I said, ‘you are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High. But you shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.’” (Ps 82:1-7) ¹⁴

This passage in Psalms is a stinging indictment to those rulers who have been given authority by God. Even though they are called the “Children of the Most High,” they are subject to His judgment, even the death penalty; this because, they did not show the divine trait of compassion and mercy upon those whom God had placed under their rule.

So *hesed* as mercy is required by God to be practiced by individuals and rulers. But it was also required of national Israel. *“Hear the word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: There is no truth or mercy [hesed] or knowledge of God in the land.” (Hos 4:1-2a)*. The word of God is plain: All people and nations regardless of their status possess, to a measured degree, the divine trait of mercy and compassion (i.e. *hesed*), and God expects all people to nurture and practice this trait.

¹⁴ These verses in Psalms gives rise to one of the more intriguing debates concerning Hebrew scholars. Evangelicals tend to see “*congregation of the mighty*” as a reference to earthy human rulers, i.e. kings and princes. However many top Hebrew language specialists point out that the text actually refers to the “Divine council” of God. The use of “gods” *elohim*, is they say, a reference to divine beings i.e. angels. While this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, it is however relevant to note that whether the reference of Psalms 82 speaks of either human rulers or angelic beings given authority, in a fashion like the “Prince of Persia” in Daniel 10:13,17, the principle remains. Kings and rulers appointed by God are expected to show mercy and compassion to those under them.

For a rewarding and scholarly study into the Biblical accounts of the “Divine Council,” based upon Hebrew translation, refer to Dr. Michael S. Heiser, editor of Logos Bible Software. www.michaelsheiser.com

Hesed as Covenant

“The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee.” (Jer 31:3)

The concept of a “covenant” brings forth visions of contracts and negotiations to the modern western mindset. Yet in the Biblical worldview, God’s “cutting and keeping covenant” is central to and the hope of our faith.

What motivates God to make and keep promises to creatures who by their fallen nature are bound to betray Him? Walter Kaiser states that it is God’s “Loyal love” or *hesed*. This is a love which is alloyed with mercy, grace and kindness. It is best exemplified in the ideal of the marriage covenant. “God’s *hesed*, the only word the prophet had to describe ‘the riches of God’s grace in the heart of God,’ would be evident when He again betrothed Israel (Hos 2:19). Thus he would “keep covenant and covenantal love” as the older texts had promised.”¹⁵

What greater way for God to explain His love and loyalty to us than to teach us through the book of Hosea? The images brought forth in a troubled marriage wherein one partner is totally loyal and self-sacrificing while the other is contemptuous of the marriage to the point of adultery and self-indulgence!

Loyalty and love in the face of treachery and betrayal. Yet the final outcome of demonstrating this loyal, covenantal love (*hesed*) is certain. God will keep His covenant with His people in a self-less act of loving the unlovable. *“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her...And it shall be, in that day, says the Lord, that you will call Me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer call Me ‘My Master.’ ”* (Hos 2:14a, 16).

¹⁵ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978) 199

How long does God honor his covenants? And what standards of behavior are his people held to in order to maintain his loyal love? In the book of Deuteronomy the covenantal love of God is demonstrated both in what God provides and his expectations of those who receive his loyal love: “... *He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy (hesed) for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandment.*”(Deut 7:9b).

God will honor His covenants and promises for a “*thousand generations,*” (i.e. without end). But it is not enough for God’s children to only be on the receiving end of God’s lovingkindness – they, (and we), must keep (or practice) His commandments as summarized by Jesus in the “dual love command” to love God and love neighbor.

In 2 Samuel we find an example wherein the mercy of God and the covenantal love of God are woven into a promise that will endure regardless of the sinful acts of the one on whom it is bestowed. When speaking through the prophet Nathan, God reminds King David that He established David’s throne, his heritage and his nation, (2 Sam 7:5-11). God then goes on to promise that He will also establish the throne of David’s seed (7:12). “*I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy [hesed] shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you.*” David and his seed are here given the assurance that God’s lovingkindness will continue even through the difficult times when David and Solomon committed sin and endured correction from the loving and loyal hand of God.

The prophet Isaiah also speaks of covenant blended with mercy in reference to King David. And yet his emphasis is to the nation of Israel and “*everyone who thirsts.*” (Is 55:1). God says, “*listen carefully to Me,*” (55: 2a), “*incline your ear and come to Me.*” And God promises, “*Hear, and your soul shall live. And I will make an everlasting covenant with you – The sure mercies [hesed] of David.*” (55:3).

These passages of Scripture which deal with the covenantal character of God beg the question; Are these promises of God's loyal love and covenant normative to us today? The text of 2 Samuel soberly reminds us that God did remove His mercy from King Saul (7:15). It is incredible to rashly claim that we are exempt from God's judgment regardless of our sinful behavior simply on the basis of a profession of faith.¹⁶ The Scriptures teach that God wants to pour out His lovingkindness upon His people, but the Bible also teaches that we are responsible to respond to God's *hesed*.

W. Van Gemeren stresses the importance of our response to lovingkindness; "In people's response to lovingkindness and all that it entails, they show that they belong to the heavenly Father."¹⁷

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." (Matt 5:44-45b)

If we are made in God's image and as believers we are "becoming like Christ," it stands to reason that we are expected be like Him and keep our covenants to God and His children. This means that we are to be deliberate in our spiritual growth. We must emulate the covenantal loyal love of God by practicing acts of lovingkindness as does our Lord, on a day-by-day basis.

"Through the Lord's mercies [hesed] we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is Your faithfulness." (Lam 3:22-23).

¹⁶ It is here that I believe the teaching of "cheap grace" in the modern Church is most dangerous. To claim that "we are not under the Law" and as such believe that God expects nothing from us except the words of our mouths, is to ignore, I fear, the words of Jesus: "*If you love me, keep My commandments.*" (Jn 14:15).

¹⁷ W.A. Van Gemeren, W. Elwell, ed, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.(Grand Rapids, MI, Baker 2001), 713

Hesed as Atonement

David Zaslow, Rabbi and Talmudic scholar, points out that God’s lovingkindness, i.e. *hesed*, can be looked upon as “atonement” for sin. Rabbi Zaslow cites a passage in the Talmud; **Avot de-Rabbi Natan 4**: “Deeds of loving-kindness are a means of atonement concerning which Scripture says, *‘I desire loving-kindness [hesed] and not sacrifice.’*” (Hos 6:6). Zaslow goes on to cite Proverbs, showing that loving-kindness [translated as mercy] is intimately involved in the atonement process; *“In mercy [hesed] and truth atonement is provided for iniquity; And by the fear of the Lord one departs from evil.”* (Prov 16:6) NKJV.

As we have seen, it is the lovingkindness of God which motivates His compassion and it also provides the vehicle by which we can obtain atonement, thus making it possible to have a relationship with the God of the universe and each other.

Does the effective atonement for sins, which God so graciously provides, abrogate the responsibility of the person who receives that atonement – even if that atonement is the vicarious atonement of Jesus? From the Jewish perspective, Zaslow responds;

Judaism teaches that human empathy for those who suffer (because of disease, natural disasters, prejudice, or oppression) brings about a certain amount of atonement within our own lives. However, it is incorrect to conclude that vicarious atonement (i.e. someone else suffering on account of our sins) abrogates personal responsibility – The Torah clearly teaches that we are each accountable for our sins. There are effective methods for the remission of sin within Judaism and Christianity, but personal responsibility cannot ever be taken by someone else: a goat, an animal, or through the suffering of another person or group.”¹⁸

Zaslow’s words may at first seem to conflict with the Christian doctrine of the efficacious sacrifice of Christ for the remission of sins – Rabbi Zaslow is after all Jewish and not Christian. However when taken in the context of “personal responsibility” and accountability for sin, Zaslow’s assertions are in agreement with several key texts in the New Testament.

¹⁸ D. Zaslow, *Roots and Branches* (Ashland, OR, Wisdom Exchange, 2006) 137-138

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (II Cor 5:10)

While eternal salvation is indeed wholly dependent upon the grace of God through Christ, NT admonitions such as II Corinthians 5:10, regarding personal responsibility for sin are clear.

Hesed and Justification

“If you ask a Jewish person if he or she is justified by faith or works you will usually get a puzzled look. Jewish theology describes an interrelationship between faith and works, between our works and God’s grace. This is why there are so many seemingly contradictory verses on the issue of faith and works throughout the Bible. They’re really not contradictions, but it seems that sometimes we’re saved by works, sometimes we’re saved by faith, and sometimes it’s a combination of the two... So a Jewish response to the question ‘Are you saved by faith or works’ might be ‘Yes, both, there is no either/or.’ I think that both Jesus and James would agree.”¹⁹

Zaslow states that justification is possible because of the lovingkindness of God. In support of this assertion he cites the Psalms;²⁰ *“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.”* (Ps 103:10-11)

What we see in this passage of scripture is the familiar two-part formula of God’s mercy [hesed]; *“so great is His lovingkindness,”* and the individual’s personal accountability to respond to God’s mercy; *“toward those who fear Him.”* This passage and others which contain this two-part formula point to a reciprocal relationship that is necessary for justification.

Psalms 130: 2-4 also presents this same formula; *“Lord, hear my voice: Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my prayers. If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who can stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.”* Forgiveness is the merciful act of the Lord, but with this mercy comes the reciprocal *“that You may be feared.”*

In this way the seeming contradictions of justification by works or justification by faith begin to fade as we realize that both works as the expression of one’s faith coupled with the mercy of God, coexist as the necessary formula for a proper and Biblical relationship with God. This relationship might be summarized as *“knowing the truth and doing the truth.”*

¹⁹ Ibid., 146

²⁰ Ibid., 147

Lovingkindness – Truth – Justice – Faithfulness; hesed, emet, mishpat, emunah

“And the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth...’” (Ex 34:6) NASB

There are patterns and interplays of word usage which can be observed in the Bible. In the study of the lovingkindness of God, there exist a large number of these patterns. Examples of these patterns can be seen with the blending and interplay of the words; *emet* (truth), *hesed* (lovingkindness), *mishpat* (justice), and *emunah* (faithfulness).

God proclaims in Exodus 34:6 that He “abounds in goodness [*hesed*] and truth [*emet*].” Notice the rendering of *hesed* as “goodness” in the KJV and NKJV. The ESV renders this same passage as “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” while the NIV translates *hesed* and *emet* as “abounding in love and faithfulness,” still, the HCSB renders these words as “rich in faithful love and truth.”

It is a mixed blessing that modern Christians have so many translations and paraphrases of the Holy Bible. On the one hand modern translators work diligently to make the texts of the Bible “readable” to contemporary eyes. On the other hand, the rush to publish the “latest and greatest” Dynamic or Formal equivalent Bible has had a number of unfortunate side effects – e.g. the loss of Biblical patterns, Hebraisms, Biblical Types and imagery.²¹

²¹ This is a very serious problem according to scholars like Leland Ryken. In his excellent book, *The Word of God in English*, (Wheaton, IL, Crossways, 2002), Ryken discusses how the increased use of Dynamic Equivalent translations tend to “destabilize the text.” What is lost is more than the “beauty and grandeur” of the Bible, the actual content of the Holy Scripture can be altered or lost altogether.

It is my observation that with respect to our word study concerning *hesed* and *emet*, this destabilization has led to a loss or lessening of our appreciation for a critical attribute of God. By translating these words so many different ways, (goodness, lovingkindness, mercy etc..) the English translators of the Original texts, (starting even before the KJV), spent more time in translating specific words or phrases in their immediate context, and less time in context to a unified theology of God. I do not in any manner wish to seem critical or unappreciative of the scholarship upon which I am so grateful and dependent. My only objective is to be aware that when doing a Hebrew word study such as this, the student must be cognizant of the fact that word-for-word concordances and lexicons are not enough. A deliberate inquiry of the Hebraic usage and mindset is vital if any study is to be complete.

There is an interesting teaching in the Talmud which states; “Seven qualities avail before the Throne of Glory: faith, righteousness, justice, lovingkindness, mercy, truth and peace.” (ARN xxxvii).²² This teaching holds that these qualities interact with one another theologically in order to form unity via a kind of check and balance held in control by the deliberate choices of God.

For example; “In the Rabbinic literature an eternal conflict is represented as being waged between God’s justice and mercy. There is scarcely a passage which refers to His capacity as Judge which does not also allude to His attribute of compassion.”²³ In support of this statement Abraham Cohen cites the Talmud – In this citation, God is portrayed as holding a conversation with Himself; “If I create the world only with the attribute of mercy, sins will multiply beyond all bounds; if I create it only with the attribute of justice, how can it last?”²⁴

Recognizing this constant interplay of characteristics such as a *hesed, emet, mishpat and emunah*, greatly increases one’s appreciation of passages of Scripture which describe the attributes of God and the characteristics of people who seek to emulate Divine attributes.

In his word study of *emet* (truth), Marvin Wilson shows how truth and faithfulness (*emunah*) are akin, in that they both suggest the idea of “firmness, sureness and reliability.” That which is true is also firm and steadfast. Thus where truth and faithfulness meet, confidence in God and acts of obedience, (and by extension – lovingkindness) result.

“The person of faith did more than believe in his heart or develop an attitude of trust. He stepped out into life to act on that belief. His mental assurances and convictions were transformed into action. For the Hebrew, faith was more than a theory; it was wed to a life of service... The person of faith was one who was so committed to God that, like Abraham, he ventured into the unknown with the full expectation that God would meet him there. Thus, in the biblical sense, to have faith was to move out in life and know that God would be waiting.”²⁵

²² A. Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud* (New York, NY, Schocken, 1949), 173.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17

²⁵ M. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 184.

W.A. Gemeren agrees with Wilson in emphasizing the critical relationship between *hesed* and *emet*; “The relationship between lovingkindness as an expression of commitment (loyalty) and truth (*emet*) expressing faithfulness is so close that the words occur next to each other some sixteen time; *hesed we ’emet* (Ps 25:10 89:14)”²⁶

Numbers 14:18 offers other examples which demonstrate a series of patterns and word usage which yield valuable insights into the character of Yahweh. “*God is longsuffering and abundant in mercy*” (14:18a). He is forgiving, yes, but He also shows His justice in that He does not clear the guilty, (18b). Iniquities and transgressions have consequences upon the offender which are long lasting; “*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.*” (18b).

In these passages the attributes of longsuffering, [*erek aph*], mercy [*hesed*] and forgiveness [*nasa*] are in measured portions to God’s justice. The use of *nasa* implies that God lifts-up and takes away the iniquities of the people. This is different than to simply ignore or forget the offense.

Another example of God’s mercy coupled with forgiveness and blended with His justice is found in the books of Exodus and Romans. The Lord’s forgiveness, mercy, and His justice are all done by His design and His sovereign will, (i.e. the doctrine of election). The Apostle Paul speaks to the doctrine of election in Romans 9:15-18 wherein he joins the teaching of election with God’s mercy by citing Exodus 33:19. After citing Exodus, Paul summaries God’s mercy and compassion in context to God’s determinate will when he states; “*Therefore He has mercy whom He wills, and whom He wills, He hardens.*” (Rom 9:18).

²⁶ W.A. Van Gemeren, W. Elwell, ed, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*.(Grand Rapids, MI, Baker 2001), 713

Scriptural patterns abound which it make clear – God expects His divine attributes of mercy, forgiveness, justice and compassion are to be emulated by His people. The Prophet Zachariah writes; “*Thus says the Lord of hosts; ‘Execute true justice [emet mishpat], show mercy [hesed] and compassion everyone to his brother.*” (Zech 7:9).

Micah also uses a similar pattern of words; “*He has shown you, O man, what is good: And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, [mishpat] to love mercy [hesed] and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Mic 6:8).

Isidore Epstein, in his work *Judaism*, exemplifies the blending of words to convey a deep understanding of the character of God with respect to mercy, lovingkindness and justice:

“Divine Righteousness fulfils itself in the quality of mercy, which includes among its derivatives ‘abundant in loving-kindness’, bestowing on the good man more than he deserves, and in the judgment of the sinner tempering justice with mercy, and, moreover, holding back punishment in the expectation of his penitence.”²⁷

In concluding this section dealing with the combination of words and concepts such as *hesed* and *emet*, it must be emphasized that no one word or phrase should be treated in isolation. Word combinations such as *hesed* and *emet* when studied in concert with the received text and Biblical theology contain a tremendous body of information and insight about the God of the Bible and His people.

²⁷ I. Epstein, *Judaism* (New York, NY, Penguin 1959) 29

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, *hesed*, or lovingkindness, is indeed a word denoting emotion but it is more a word of action. On the one hand, *hesed* is a gift from God, that is to say, God imparts a measure of His lovingkindness to each of us. On the other hand *hesed* can be likened to a muscle in the body. A muscle, which if exercised, will become strong and able to do more and more; but if left unused will become weakened and eventually useless.

Hesed can be defined as mercy and grace, and as such, *hesed* represents an opportunity to demonstrate that we are children of God and followers of Christ. This, by practicing acts of lovingkindness. While *hesed* represents an opportunity however, it can also be our accuser before God if we fail to practice this gift.

Hesed then is a stewardship over something most precious. *Hesed* is loyalty, it is faithfulness, and it is making and keeping covenants. *Hesed* is the companion of truth. Those who walk in truth also walk in loyalty to God and demonstrate lovingkindness to God's creation.

This paper began by posing the question; what is the primal force of the universe? As we have seen, the answer to this question can be said to be summarized in the Hebrew word *hesed*. That is to say, divine lovingkindness, mercy and grace which motivated the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to create the universe. And it is through the expression of this divine trait of *hesed*, the God of the Bible maintains and will eventually reconcile creation to Him.

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| ESV | <i>English Standard Version</i> . Wheaton: Crossways, 2003 |
| HCSV | <i>Holman Christian Standard Version</i> |
| NIV | <i>New International Version</i> . Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 1973 |
| NASB | <i>New American Standard Version</i> . La Habra: The Lockman Foundation 1960 |
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