

SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-04-15—HESED = COVENANT LOYALTY & DEVOTION

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

There are a few biblical words that present a challenge when translating to English. The Hebrew word *checed* or *hesed* (H2617) is one of them. Notice a few verses in Psalm 136:

PSALM 136:1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for *he is good*: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever.**

PSALM 136:10 To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever:**

PSALM 136:15 But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever.**

PSALM 136:17 To him which smote great kings: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever:**

PSALM 136:18 And slew famous kings: **for his mercy [hesed] endureth for ever:**

Does the refrain “for his mercy *endureth* for ever” fit with God destroying the firstborn of Egypt or drowning the Egyptian army or killing kings? Psalm 136 is a good example of a translation problem that has gone on for centuries. Look at another example:

GENESIS 21:22-23 And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God *is* with thee in all that thou doest: 23 Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son’s son: **but according to the kindness [hesed] that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me,** and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.

This occasion was the result of quarrels among the servants of Abimilech and Abraham over water rights to a well. To resolve it, Abimelech wanted to make a treaty with Abraham. Up until that point, however, the Bible gives no indication that Abimilech had done Abraham any real past “kindnesses.” Or what about this next example?

HOSEA 6:4 O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for **your goodness [hesed] is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.**

This infers some sort of a “goodness” that God expected from Ephraim and Judah. When we read of Hezekiah’s death we find a similar curious reference to his “goodness”<sup>1</sup>:

2 CHRONICLES 32:32 Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his **goodness [hesed]**, behold, they *are* written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, and in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Also 2 Chr. 35:26.

Or, what is behind Jonathan *demanding* “the kindness of the LORD” *from* David:

1 SAMUEL 20:14-16 And **thou [David] shalt not only while yet I [Jonathan] live shew me the kindness [hesed] of the LORD**, that I die not: 15 But *also* **thou shalt not cut off thy kindness [hesed] from my house for ever**: no, not when the LORD hath cut off the enemies of David every one from the face of the earth. 16 So **Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David**, saying, Let the LORD even require *it* at the hand of David’s enemies.

... or God “**keeping** mercy” for thousands:

EXODUS 34:6-7 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and **abundant in goodness [hesed]** and truth, 7 **Keeping mercy [hesed] for thousands**, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and to the fourth *generation*.

The English translations of *hesed* in the above verses just do not fit the context. Moreover, *hesed* has been variously translated as mercy, kindness, lovingkindness, goodness, and favor among several different words. So why all the different meanings? The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint or LXX (“seventy”), originated in Alexandria, Egypt about 250 BC and has influenced the way the Hebrew text has been translated for centuries. When the council of seventy came upon the word *hesed*, they chose to use the Greek word *eleos* (G1656), which means mercy or compassion. However, this was a poor choice because it is not only misleading but very inadequate. Notice this definition from Vine’s Dictionary for *hesed* (*emphasis mine*):

... In general, one may identify three basic meanings of the word [*hesed*], which always **interact**: “strength,” “steadfastness,” and “love.” **Any understanding of the word that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness**. “Love” by itself easily becomes sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant. Yet, “Strength” or “Steadfastness” suggests only the fulfillment of a legal or other obligation.

The word refers primarily to mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between the parties of a relationship (especially Yahweh and Israel). **But hesed is not only a matter of obligation; it is also of generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy**. The weaker party seeks the protection and blessing of the patron and protector, but he may not lay absolute claim to it. The stronger party remains committed to his promise, but retains his freedom, especially with regard to the matter in which he will implement those promises. *Hesed* implies personal involvement and commitment in a relationship beyond the rule of law.

Marital love is often related to *hesed*. Marriage certainly is a legal matter, and there are legal sanctions for infractions. Yet the relationship, if sound, far transcends mere legalities. ... **Hence, “devotion” is sometimes the single English word best capable of capturing the nuance of the original**. The RSV attempts to bring this out by its translation, “steadfast love.” Hebrew writers often underscored the element of steadfastness (or strength) by pairing *hesed* with ‘emet (“truth, reliability”) and ‘emunah (“faithfulness”). ...

The association of *hesed* with “covenant” keeps it from being misunderstood as mere providence or love for all creatures; **it applies primarily to God’s particular love for His chosen and covenanted people.** “Covenant” also stresses the reciprocity of the relationship; but since God’s *hesed* is ultimately beyond the covenant, it will not ultimately be abandoned, even when the human partner is unfaithful and must be disciplined (Isa. 54:8, 10).

The key to unlocking the full meaning of *hesed* is identifying the parties involved in the reciprocal relationship:

*Hesed* of man – kindness of men towards men, in doing favors and benefits; kindness extended to the lowly, needy and miserable; mercy; affection or love of God, piety.

*Hesed* of God – redemption from enemies and troubles; in preservation of life from death; in offering of eternal life; in redemption from sin; in keeping the covenants with Abraham; Moses, and Israel.

From this we can see that *hesed* reflects a combination of faithfulness + steadfastness + love, which is expressed as loyalty + devotion to a person or cause. However, loyalty and devotion are also part of a **covenant** relationship that grants the parties certain rights that they can expect of each other. Inserting this new meaning into Psalms 136:10 brings better clarity:

PSALM 136:10 To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: **for his [loyal devotion to His covenant people] endureth for ever:**

This also helps understand the bond between David and Jonathan:

1 SAMUEL 20:8 Therefore thou [*Jonathan*] shalt deal kindly **[be loyal or devoted to]** thy servant [*David*]; for **thou hast brought thy servant into a covenant of the LORD with thee:** ...

The idea that loyalty and devotion is tied to a covenant relationship is obvious and important. Look also at the NT meaning of *hesed* from the perspective of Jesus Christ:

MATTHEW 9:11-13 And after seeing *this*, the Pharisees said to His disciples, “Why does your Master eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 12 But when Jesus heard *it*, He said to them, “Those who are strong do not have need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Now go and learn what this means: **‘I desire mercy [*eleos*] and not sacrifice.’** For **I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.**”

In these verses, the *mercy* is the Greek word *eleos*. The problem is that the meaning is lost entirely—how does man show “mercy” to God? But the original Hebrew was *hesed* because Jesus was quoting Hosea 6:6:

HOSEA 6:6 ... For **I desired mercy [*hesed* = loyal devotion to My covenant], and not sacrifice;** and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Matthew 9:11-13 goes to the heart of Jesus Christ’s purpose on earth—to bring redemption to a sinful world. It is a message of a covenant with God. Jesus Christ came to call sinners to repentance. Does God desire mercy **from us**? No. He seeks loyalty and devotion—*hesed*. To

what? To our COVENANT with God the Father and Jesus Christ! This partly comes in the form of sinners repenting.

In fact, is not repentance loyalty and devotion to God's Law? What is baptism but a demonstration of loyalty and devotion to God by symbolically laying down our lives to Him? What is Holy Spirit in us but God's loyal devotion for His promise to us in our covenant?

*Hesed* is difficult to translate because there is no single English word that captures the depth and meaning of it. The Greek translation of the OT lost the meaning of *hesed* by using *eleos* (mercy) because covenant loyalty and devotion is such a foundational underpinning of the Bible and God's relationship with mankind.

It is so important that the Passover, Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost directly mirror this relationship. These days are the formulation of *hesed*—covenant loyalty and devotion. It starts with Passover when God spared our lives with the blood ransom of the New Covenant. He then liberates us from a sinful world and leads us on a journey to the Promised Land as portrayed in the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Contained within the Feast days is the Wavesheaf offering—God's acceptance of the sacrificial Lamb and King following His resurrection. From that day only is counted fifty days to the seed of our new heavenly citizenship as members of the Elohim family through the Holy Spirit as portrayed on Pentecost. These unique connections form the basis for our covenant with God whereas the autumn holydays are Kingdom Days—they tell of the pathway to the realization of God's Kingdom. But it all starts with the Covenant Days:

LUKE 1:68-75 "Blessed be *the* Lord, the God of Israel, because He has visited and has worked redemption for His people, 69 And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David; 70 Exactly as He spoke by *the* mouth of His holy prophets since the world began; 71 **Salvation from our enemies and from *the* hand of all those who hate us;** 72 To **fulfill *the* promise of mercy [covenant loyalty and devotion]** made to our fathers, and **to remember His holy covenant,** 73 *The* oath that He swore to Abraham our father; to grant us *that*, 74 Being saved from *the* hand of our enemies, **we might serve Him** without fear, 75 **Walking in holiness and righteousness before Him** all the days of our lives.

*Hesed* is loyalty and devotion to God the Father and Jesus Christ in a covenant in which the relationship is bound by God's faithfulness + steadfastness + love in return for our love, obedience, and faithfulness. *Hesed* is the reason we will have salvation from death and the greatest gift—to be God's children in the eternal fullness of agape love, joy, and peace!

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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