

HESED AS OBLIGATION: A RE-EXAMINATION

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Summary

*While there is little dispute that *hesed* is a significant term, opinion is divided over its meaning. Glueck defines *hesed* in terms of loyalty and mutual obligation within the context of relationships, especially relationships involving a covenant. More recent studies, however, have minimised this aspect, linking *hesed*, instead, with ideas of benevolence and kindness. This article looks at the use of *hesed* in the OT in the setting of human relationships and the relationship between God and his people, and considers, too, the Hebrew terms with which *hesed* is most closely associated. It concludes in favour of the more traditional interpretation, and considers the significance of this understanding for the covenant people of God.*

I. Introduction

Hesed has been the subject of a number of studies, and it would be impossible to analyse them all.¹ The purpose of this article is to re-examine a currently, widely-accepted view that *hesed* may be defined, principally, in terms of benevolence or kindness and is to be associated only minimally with the notion of duty and obligation. The view that this latter concept should in fact be regarded as primary is expressed by N. Glueck; he defines *hesed* as:

conduct in accord with a mutual relationship of rights and duties, corresponding to a mutually obligatory relationship...

¹The most influential of these are outlined by G. Clark in his recently published monograph *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTS 157; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 15-24.

principally: reciprocity, mutual assistance, sincerity, friendliness, brotherliness, duty, loyalty and love.²

Hesed is thus interpreted as general behaviour within the norms of an already established relationship. In particular, Glueck links *hesed* with relationships which are based upon a covenant, and suggests that '*hesed* is the real essence of *bērit*, and it can almost be said that it is its very content.'³ N.H. Snaith also wants to emphasise the close link between *hesed* and *bērit*; he translates *hesed* as 'covenant love', maintaining that 'the word represents that attitude to a covenant without which the covenant would cease to exist.'⁴

Other scholars have taken a different approach. Stoebe, for example, challenges the close association of *hesed* and *bērit* and the view that the term contains the notion of legal obligation.⁵ He emphasises, instead, the link between *hesed* and *rahāmīm* (mercy, kindness) with which it frequently appears, and interprets *hesed* as 'goodness or kindness which goes beyond what one may expect or deserve, and which has its sole basis in a willing generosity towards others.'⁶ A similar view is expressed by Zobel who like Stoebe, rejects the notion of legal obligation and concludes that 'the most appropriate translation of *hesed* is "goodness", "grace," or "kindness."⁷

In the most recent contribution to the debate, G. Clark has produced a semantic study of *hesed*, considering elements of the lexical field to which it belongs, and looking at relationships between the various field members. Clark's study confirms the close association of *hesed* with *rahāmīm*⁸ and *tôb*⁹

²*Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967) 55.

³*Op. cit.*, 47.

⁴N.H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (5th ed.; London: Epworth, 1953) 94-130 *passim*; quotation from p. 95.

⁵H.J. Stoebe 'Die Bedeutung des Wortes *häsäd* im AT', *VT* 2 (1952) 244-54.

⁶*Op. cit.*, 248.

⁷H.J. Zobel, *s.v. Hesed* in G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the OT*, V (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 44-64; quotation from p. 51.

⁸*The Word Hesed*, 142-49.

⁹*Ibid.*, 218-31, 259-60.

but stresses, too, the elements of mutual obligation and of faithful commitment which are also included in *hesed* but which are generally absent from these other terms.

II. *Hesed* in Human Relationships

One point of general agreement among scholars is that *hesed* is most frequently expressed in the context of a relationship and often, though not exclusively, within the setting of the family or clan. It is an attitude and the corresponding action which arises out of, and is in accordance with the norms of, particular social bonds.¹⁰ Thus *hesed* is evident between husband and wife (Ge. 20:13), between father and son (Ge. 47:29; see also Ru. 1:8; 3:10), between other relatives (Ge. 24:49; 1 Sa. 15:6; Ru. 2:20), between host and guest (Ge. 19:19; Ge. 21:23; Jos. 2:12), between friends (1 Sa. 20:8; 2 Sa. 16:17; Jb. 6:14) and between a king and his subjects (2 Sa. 3:8; 2 Sa. 16:17; Pr. 20:28; Is. 16:5). *Hesed* also describes proper behaviour towards others within the community of God's people (Jb. 24:21; Ps. 109:16; Pr. 11:17; Is. 57:1; Mi. 6:8; Zc. 7:9).

Another, linked, aspect of *hesed* is its mutuality. *Hesed* is expected of those to whom *hesed*, or another act of kindness, has been shown (e.g. Ge. 21:23; 40:14; Jos. 2:12; Judg. 1:24; 8:35; 2 Sa. 2:5-6; 10:2; 1 Ki. 2:7). In such cases *hesed* may be freed from its family or clan context and based upon the bond established through the giving and receiving of help, rather than an already existing relationship. Thus, having shown *hesed* to the Israelite spies, Rahab expects *hesed* to be shown to her and her family (Jos. 2:12):

¹⁰See, e.g., Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 37; Zobel, *TDOT* V, 53. W.F. Lofthouse ('Hen and Hesed in the Old Testament', *ZAW* 51 [1933] 32-33) notes that it is the existence of a recognised tie that distinguishes *hesed* from *hēn* (grace, favour). Clark observes that '*hesed* refers to an act, performed for the benefit of a person in need, in the context of a deep and enduring commitment between the parties concerned' (*The Word Hesed*, 192; cf. 164-86).

Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness (*hesed*) to my family, because I have shown kindness (*hesed*) to you.

Rahab's initial kindness may have been based on the relationship between host and guest, thus justifying its description as *hesed*. Another possibility is that she showed kindness to the spies in order that they would show her a similar kindness. If so, then her initial action could be seen to be based, not on an actual, but on an anticipated relationship and that, too, might justify it being called *hesed*. In either case, she expected that her act of kindness would be rewarded by *hesed*.

Though this expected reciprocation of *hesed* was not a legal obligation, its failure was taken seriously.¹¹ Thus when Israel did not demonstrate due *hesed* to Gideon and his family the nation earned not only the disapproval of the writer of Judges, but also divine judgment (Judg. 8:35; 9:16-20, 36); Jehoiada expected that God would call Joash to account for a similar omission (2 Ch. 24:22).

Hesed and bērit

In considering the relational and mutual aspects of *hesed*, it is important to note that despite criticism of Glueck's position,¹² there is a close relationship between *hesed* and *bērit*.¹³

In Genesis 21:23 Abimelech urges Abraham to respond to the *hesed* he has been shown, by showing *hesed* in return.

Now swear to me here before God that you will not deal falsely with me or my children or my descendants. Show to me and the country where you are living as an alien the same kindness [*hesed*] I have shown to you.

The *hesed* demonstrated by Abimelech is in receiving Abraham as a guest (cf. Ge. 20:15), and showing him hospitality. In view of that action, and in accordance with the norms of the

¹¹See, e.g., K.D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 24, 44-45.

¹²E.g., A. Jepsen 'Gnade und Barmherzigkeit im AT', *Kerygma und Dogma* 7 (1961) 265

¹³See also Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 125-132, 136

relationship thereby established, Abimelech expects Abraham to show *ḥesed* in return, both to him and to the country in which he is a sojourner, and he calls Abraham to confirm that response by an oath. The agreement thus established is described (in v. 27) as a treaty or covenant. It is clear that the acts of *ḥesed* precede, and therefore do not require, *bērit*.¹⁴ However, it is also apparent that the covenant was made in order to secure the continuation of mutual acts of *ḥesed*. This suggests a close association between *ḥesed* and *bērit*, in which the existence of a *bērit* assures the permanence of *ḥesed*. Abimelech calls for Abraham to show *ḥesed* on the basis of the *ḥesed* shown to him—and might expect him to do so without any specific agreement; nonetheless he requests a covenant as the basis for and guarantee of future acts of *ḥesed*.

A similar situation is in view in 1 Sa. 20:8, where David urges Jonathan to show *ḥesed* in accordance with the covenant of friendship established between them and before Yahweh (cf 1 Sa. 18:1-3):

As for you, show kindness (*ḥesed*) to your servant, for you have brought him into a covenant with you before the LORD...

Here, the *bērit* was established on the basis of their friendship, and on the basis of friendship alone David might have appealed for Jonathan to show him *ḥesed*. However, it is to their covenant relationship that David appeals. This suggests that while *bērit* is not a prerequisite for the demonstration of *ḥesed*, where a *bērit* exists it provides a firm, and in this case the primary, basis for *ḥesed*. This is further emphasised in 1 Samuel 20:14-17 where, in order to guarantee that *ḥesed* will continue to be shown to him and to his family through succeeding generations, Jonathan enters into a covenant with the house of David—just as Abimelech had done with Abraham. Thus, once again, the existence of a *bērit* is regarded as an assurance of the permanence of *ḥesed*.

¹⁴Cf. Jepson, 'Gnade und Barmherzigkeit'.

***Ḥesed* and other Associated Terms**

In the above instances, *ḥesed* refers not only to a kind or benevolent response but also to a dutiful response which, whilst not legally binding is represented as a social and moral obligation. Whether in the context of family or social relationships, the ties of friendship, the bonds established by the giving and receiving of help, or the commitment of covenant partners, *ḥesed* corresponds to right behaviour towards others within that relationship. This may be expressed as 'goodness' or 'kindness', but an equally significant element is that it is what is proper and appropriate; *ḥesed* thus includes, too, such ideas as duty, loyalty and faithfulness and this is further confirmed by the many occasions where *ḥesed*, both human and divine, is linked with *ʾēmet* (faithfulness).¹⁵ Clark notes that *rahāmîm* and *ḥesed* are very closely linked,¹⁶ and this is acknowledged, too, by Glueck who observes that 'from *ḥesed* to *rahāmîm* is but a short step'; however, as Glueck goes on to say, *ḥesed* 'embodies the idea of obligation which is not at all the case with *rahāmîm*'.¹⁷ A close relationship has also been observed between *ḥesed* and *tôb*.¹⁸ Again, however, the element of commitment between the parties concerned provides an important distinction.¹⁹ This embrace of ideas associated with faithfulness and commitment and also those associated with

¹⁵Referring to human affairs and relationships: Ge. 24:49; 47:29; Jos. 2:14; 2 Sa. 2:6; 15:20; Pr. 3:3; 14:22; 20:28; Ho. 4:1; referring to divine qualities: Ge. 24:27; 32:10; Ex. 34:6; Pss. 25:10; 40:10-11; 57:3, 10; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15; 89:14; 108:4; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2; Pr. 16:6; Is. 16:5; Mi. 7:20. See also Pss. 98:3; 100:5, where *ḥesed* is linked with *ʾēmūnâ*. For a more detailed analysis, see N.H.Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas*, 100-101; G. Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 149-156, 235-55.

¹⁶*Op. cit.*, 142-49.

¹⁷*Hesed in the Bible*, 62. Note also W. Eichrodt's description of *rahāmîm* as 'a quite spontaneous expression of love, evoked by no kind of obligation' (*Theology of the OT* [London: SCM, 1975] I, 237-38); and Clark's conclusion that 'commitment between participants is important with *ḥesed* but not with *rahāmîm*' (*The Word Hesed*, 263).

¹⁸E.g., by Stoebe, 'Die Bedeutung', 248; see also Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 219-31.

¹⁹E.g., Clark, *op. cit.*, 260-61.

kindness, compassion and goodness is a significant feature of *ḥesed*.²⁰

Jepsen rightly notes that *ḥesed* designates not only particular actions, but also the attitude that gives rise to them, and thus any full definition of *ḥesed* must take the motive for action into account.²¹ From the above discussion it is clear that specific acts of *ḥesed* are not, nor are they expected to be, motivated solely by a benevolent or generous disposition. *Ḥesed* is not simply kindness or goodness. To restrict its meaning to such terms focuses too much on the inclination of the one from whom *ḥesed* is expected, and does not adequately convey the obligations of relationship that form the basis for that expectation. *Ḥesed* is more than an emotional response to the need of another. Behind the action lies, also, a sense of duty and faithful commitment to do what is right—which is reinforced by the pressure of social convention or even the possibility of divine retribution (Ge. 21:23; Jos. 2:12; 2 Ch. 24:22, etc). On the other hand, *ḥesed* may not be defined solely in terms of the dispassionate discharge of legal or moral obligations. The *ḥesed*-relationship requires not only mutually beneficial action, but also a right orientation of attitude and will; a commitment not only to the relationship, but also to the one to whom *ḥesed* is to be shown. *Ḥesed* is frequently rendered 'love' and where this properly takes on board the notion of commitment, often lacking from its modern-day understanding, then it goes some, but not all, of the way to

²⁰Clark's analysis of terms which collocate with *ḥesed* points to closest association with (respectively) *ʿemet*, *ṭob*, *raḥāmîm*, *ʿemūnâ*, *bērît*, *mišpāt* and *šedāqâ* (*op. cit.*, 108). There is a significantly smaller degree of collocation between *ʿemet* and *ṭob*, and very little between *ʿemet* and *raḥāmîm*. Thus despite similarities, no one of the words commonly associated with *ḥesed* can replace it in its relationship with the others, and thus none provides an exact synonym.

²¹*Kerygma und Dogma* 7 (1961) 266. Stoebe, 'Die Bedeutung', 247-8, suggests that *ḥesed* refers to that benevolent attitude which is worked out in specific acts of kindness (*raḥāmîm*). Against this, see K.D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Ḥesed*, 73.

expressing the full breadth of meaning of the term.²² *Hesed* expresses, essentially, faithfulness and loyal conduct within the context of a relationship; it is an inward commitment and disposition of goodwill together with its outward expression in dutiful and compassionate action. The precise nature of that action depends upon the context, the relationship and also upon the relative positions and abilities of parties within that relationship.²³

I. God's *hesed*

This more general understanding of *hesed* as proper conduct within the context of a mutual bond has significant implications for the relationship between God and his covenant people.

Clark notes that in two-thirds of its total number of occurrences, *hesed* is shown by God to people;²⁴ he thus describes it as 'a characteristic of God rather than human

²²This aspect of *hesed's* meaning is sometimes included in a qualifying adjective, e.g., 'unfailing love', 'covenant love', 'leal love', etc.

²³Cf. Clark's description of *hesed* as 'an emotion that leads to an activity beneficial to the recipient... a beneficent action performed, in the context of a deep and enduring commitment between two persons or parties, by one who is able to render assistance to the needy party who in the circumstances is unable to help him- or herself' (*The Word Hesed*, 267; my emphasis). Sakenfeld (*The Meaning of Hesed*, 24, 44-45) identifies similar conditions, noting that for an action properly to be called *hesed* the one receiving the act of kindness must be unable to do what is needed him- or herself, the action must be completely necessary, and the one in need of help must have no control over whether *hesed* is given. However, not every instance of *hesed* sits easily with the conditions set in that form (for example, it is difficult to say that the *hesed* shown or required in Ge. 21:23; 2 Sa. 2:6; 10:2; 1 Ki. 2:7, etc., is completely necessary). It is going too far to insist that these are implicit within the meaning of the term, since in those cases where they are present it is only to be expected that when one asks help of another it is because he or she is in need and cannot help him- or herself.

²⁴*The Word Hesed*, 49, 53. Out of 282 occurrences, 187 have God as the agent.

beings; it is rooted in the divine nature.²⁵ Further evidence of this is seen in the prominent place given to *hesed* in the formula expressed in Ex. 34:6 which represents, in varying forms, an orthodox summary of the attributes of God:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love (*hesed*) and faithfulness.²⁶

Hesed is closely linked, too, with divine covenants.²⁷ The formulation 'covenant of love (*hesed*)' to refer to the Sinaitic covenant,²⁸ and the ongoing commitment that God's people expect in the light of it, indicates that *hesed* was viewed as the content of divine *bērit*. The close association between *hesed* and *bērit* is seen further in several passages where the terms appear in parallel (e.g., Pss. 106:45; 89:28; Is. 54:10). This relationship is expressed in two complementary ways. In Psalm 106:45 *bērit* and *hesed* occur together and in that order:

for their sake he [Yahweh] remembered his covenant (*bērit*) and out of his great love (*hesed*) he relented.

Here *hesed* may be interpreted as the faithful love of God expressed towards his people because of the covenant relationship between them. *Hesed* is the content of the divine *bērit*, and the covenant provides the basis for God's continuing *hesed*. In Psalm 89:28 the words again appear together, but the order is reversed:

I [Yahweh] will maintain my kindness (*hesed*) to him forever and my covenant (*bērit*) with him will never fail.

In this case, *hesed* is not, primarily, the content of *bērit* but rather the basis on which the covenant relationship will be enabled to continue. *Hesed* precedes, and indeed gives rise to

²⁵*Op. cit.*, 267.

²⁶See also, e.g., Nu. 14:18; Ne. 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2; cf. Ex. 20:6; Dt. 5:10.

²⁷Cf. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 73-79; Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 128-132.

²⁸E.g., Dt. 7:9, 12; 1 Ki. 8:23 (2 Ch. 6:14); Ne. 1:5; 9:32; Dn. 9:4.

the *bērit*, which then provides additional assurance that God's promise will not fail (vv. 34-37).²⁹

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we may conclude that when God entered into a covenant with Israel he bound himself to show *hesed* to them. It was because of his covenant with Abraham that God demonstrated his *hesed* in delivering Israel from Egypt (Ex. 2:24) and, in the light of the special relationship established through the Sinaitic and Davidic covenants, God's people could expect God to go on showing *hesed* to them. It was upon this unfailing and enduring divine love³⁰ that God's servants based their confidence and their appeal for deliverance in times of trouble.³¹ Sakenfeld notes that these appeals fall into two groups;³² these correspond broadly to the association of *hesed* with ideas of righteousness and grace.

1. *Hesed* and Righteousness

Sometimes the appeal to be shown divine *hesed* is based upon the uprightness of the one in need. In this case, *hesed* is used in the same way as in a secular context: one in need calls for help on the basis of a relationship that is in good order.³³ Understood in this way, there is a significant overlap between *hesed* and the *šdq* (righteousness) word group. Righteousness in the Old Testament is not simply to do with meeting legal criteria but rather, as with *hesed*, it is concerned with right

²⁹Zobel (*TDOT* V, 60-61) argues that this represents a pre-Deuteronomistic understanding of the relationship between *hesed* and *bērit*, particularly with respect to the Davidic covenant, where God's *hesed* is stressed (e.g., 2 Sa. 7:15) with the idea of *bērit* introduced primarily to reinforce the promise of *hesed* (e.g., Ps. 89:28, 49 cf. Ge. 21:23; 1 Sa. 20:8). He argues that the idea of *hesed* as the content of *bērit* is a feature of Deuteronomistic theology and therefore comparatively late. However, for the introduction of a *bērit* to provide the required reinforcement, it must already have been very closely associated with *hesed*.

³⁰E.g., 1 Ch. 16:34; 2 Ch. 5:13; 20:21; Pss. 107:1; 118:1-4, 29; 136; Je. 33:11.

³¹E.g., Pss. 6:4; 44:26; 86:5-7; 89; 107; 119:88, 159; 143:12; Mi. 7:20. See W. Eichrodt *Theology* I, 233-35.

³²*The Meaning of Hesed*, 148.

³³E.g., Ne. 13:14, 22; Pss. 26:1-12; 36:10; 44:17-26.

behaviour within the setting of a particular relationship.³⁴ It is appropriate, therefore, to consider how these terms relate to one another.

Ḥesed and *šĕdāqâ* occur together in several passages³⁵ and are parallel in Psalm 36:10(11); 103:17-18. These confirm the close association of the two terms but, in most cases, do not help to distinguish between them. Psalm 98:2-3 is a possible exception:

The Lord has made his salvation (*yĕšû'â*) known and revealed his righteousness (*šĕdāqâ*) to the nations. He has remembered his love (*Ḥesed*) and his faithfulness (*'ĕmûnâ*) to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation (*yĕšû'â*) of our God.

In this passage, the salvation which Yahweh is to work on behalf of his people and which will be made known throughout the earth is a manifestation of his *Ḥesed*.³⁶ *Yĕšû'â*, here, is also closely linked with Yahweh's *šĕdāqâ*, the vindication of his people in the eyes of the whole world,³⁷ and this, too, may be interpreted as the outworking of Yahweh's *Ḥesed* towards his

³⁴A.A. Anderson, *Psalms* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972) 262, suggests that 'Righteousness (*šĕdāqâ*) is a term of relationships, denoting that kind of conduct which serves to maintain the established ties... In a covenant context "righteousness" signifies faithfulness to the obligations stipulated by the Covenant, but in general it may imply a behaviour which is right according to the standards accepted by the community'. Following H. Cremer, Eichrodt describes *šdq* as 'a concept of relation referring to an actual relationship between two persons and implying behaviour which corresponds to, or is true to, the claims arising out of such a relationship' (*Theology I*, 240). See also, e.g., H. Seebass and C. Brown s.v. 'Righteousness' in C. Brown (ed.), *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 354-58.

³⁵E.g., 1 Ki. 3:6; Pss. 33:5; 36:10; 40:10; 103:17; Pr. 21:21; Je. 9:24; Ho. 10:12.

³⁶*Yĕšû'â* as a manifestation of *Ḥesed* is seen, too, in Pss. 106 and 118, where Yahweh's mighty acts (including salvation) are set against the background of divine *Ḥesed*. See Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 156-58.

³⁷See also Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas*, 87-93.

covenant people.³⁸ This could be extended to other aspects of *šēdāqâ* such as justice, which, when shown by God to man may also be seen as the outworking of divine *ḥesed*, and when required within society may be seen as the proper response to others within the covenant community—and thus again fall within the scope of *ḥesed*.³⁹

A further distinction between *ḥesed* and *šēdāqâ* is in their respective relationships with *raḥāmîm*. Whilst *ḥesed* and *raḥāmîm* are very closely linked, on the single occasion where *šēdāqâ* and *raḥāmîm* occur in the same verse it is to express a contrast:

Give ear, O God and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous [lit: because of our righteousness (*šēdāqâ*)] but because of your great mercy (*raḥāmîm*).⁴⁰

Right behaviour for the people of God, within the context of the covenant, is behaviour that conforms to the demands of that relationship, which includes uprightness (Ps. 36:10; Is. 33:15), cleanness of hand and heart before God (2 Sa. 22:21, 25; Is. 64:6) and obedience to his Law.⁴¹ Righteousness thus does have an important legal and ethical dimension. It is presented as the antithesis of wickedness and evil⁴² and is used to describe weights and measures⁴³ and sacrifices⁴⁴ which accord

³⁸See e.g., Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 158-60. Clark notes that in this passage, while Israel experiences Yahweh's *ḥesed*, the nations are made aware only of its more tangible expressions in *yēšū'â* and *šēdāqâ*.

³⁹Eichrodt suggests: 'One expression of Yahweh's covenant love is his righteousness. Just as the *ḥesed* which God desires from man includes the practice of righteousness... so God shows his favour by doing justice and righteousness' (*Theology I*, 239-40).

⁴⁰Da. 9:18. *šedeq* also occurs with *raḥāmîm* in Ho. 2:19.

⁴¹E.g., Dt. 6:25; Ps. 119:42; Is. 48:18; 51:7; 58:2.

⁴²E.g., Ex. 23:7; Dt. 25:1; 1 Ki. 8:32; Jb. 35:8; Ps. 45:7; Pr. 10:2; 11:5, 6, 18, 19; 14:34; 15:9; 16:12.

⁴³Lv. 19:36; Dt. 25:15; Ezk. 45:10; Jb. 31:6.

⁴⁴Dt. 33:19; Ps. 4:5; Mal. 3:3.

with due regulations. Its close association with *mišpāt* (justice)⁴⁵ also indicates its legal and judicial aspect. This is evident when we consider the basis upon which divine righteousness is expected. The poor, oppressed and afflicted may call on God to uphold the rightness of their cause and to deliver them from their enemies,⁴⁶ while others may look for justice on the basis of their prior response to God.⁴⁷ This suggests a dependence upon, not just the existence of relationship but also some implied merit within it. In his prayer, however, Daniel may advance no such claims and so appeals, instead, for God to show mercy and compassion towards the people who bear his Name (Dan 9:19). These are elements which figure prominently in *hesed*, but which are associated less with *sedeq/šedāqā*.⁴⁸

2. *Hesed* and Grace

In Sakenfeld's second category appeals are based, not upon any human merit, but rather upon the faithfulness of God to help the undeserving. In these instances, *hesed* is seen to depend solely upon God and takes the form of grace, in bearing with those who have broken the covenant, and in bringing forgiveness and restoration.⁴⁹

⁴⁵E.g., Ge. 18:19; Dt. 33:21; 2 Sa. 8:15; Jb. 37:23; Pss. 33:5; 36:6; 72:1; 99:4; Pr. 8:20; Is. 1:27; 5:7, 16; 9:7; 28:17; 32:16; 56:1; 59:9, 14; Je. 4:2; 9:24; 22:23; Ezk.18:5; Am. 5:7, 24.

⁴⁶E.g., Pss. 72:2; 103:6; 112:9; Is. 11:4; Pss. 9:4; 35:24; 71:24; Is. 5:15-16. On a similar basis, the nation in exile looks for God to declare his righteousness by bringing deliverance from a godless oppressor which at present gloats over Israel's fallen state (e.g., Mi. 7:8-10), and so silencing all who oppose God (Is. 45:24-25).

⁴⁷This may include uprightness, (e.g., Jb. 27:6; Pss. 7:8; 15:2; 17:1-2; 2 Sa. 22:21, 25), trust (Ps. 31:1), penitence (Is. 1:27) and seeking after God (Is. 51:1, 5; Ho. 10:12; Zp. 2:3).

⁴⁸Whilst this distinction generally holds, there are exceptions; for example God's merciful response to the weak and needy is linked with his righteousness in Pss. 4:1; 143:1.

⁴⁹E.g., Ps. 40:11-12; Is. 54:8; Joel 2:13; see also Ezr. 9:9; Ne. 9:17; La. 3:22, 31-32. However, as noted above (n. 10), *hesed* is to be distinguished from *ḥēn* (grace, favour). The principle difference between the terms is in the area of the commitment of the parties concerned. *Ḥēn* may point to a long-term disposition of good-will, but more generally it refers to the

An important aspect of this is the connection between *hesed* and forgiveness. In Psalm 51:1(3) the Psalmist cries out:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great compassion (*hesed*) blot out my transgressions.

The writer recognises that sin has marred his relationship with God and prays, therefore, that God, on the basis of his *hesed*, (here paralleled with *rahāmim*) will blot out his sins and so restore the relationship.⁵⁰ Thus, as well as being God's lovingkindness expressed towards those who stand in right relationship with him, *hesed* is also of vital significance as that in accordance with which God forgives those who have broken the terms of the relationship and by which he ensures that the breakdown is not permanent. This corresponds to the two-way link between *hesed* and *bērit* already noted, in which *hesed* both derives from the relationship and is the means by which the relationship is enabled to continue even though, because of the unfaithfulness of one party, it might properly be terminated. Commenting on the divine motives for forgiveness, Eichrodt notes the importance of *hesed*:

To this *hesed*-Yahweh, on which man can rely in every distress, it belongs also to forgive transgressions, and so

passing favour that one party seeks or gives to another. Even where *hēn* is part of a long-term commitment, such as marriage, it may be withdrawn (Dt. 24:10). H-J Fabry suggests that 'to show someone favour is perhaps a more superficial expression of oneself than to show love (*ahab*)' (s.v. *hanan* in *Theological Dictionary of the OT* V, 24)—an observation that may well be extended to include *hesed*, which, even as an expression of grace is rooted firmly in the relationship of the parties concerned. See also, Lofthouse, 'Hen and Hesed'; Clarke, *The Word Hesed*, 263; Fabry, *TDOT* V, 22-36.

⁵⁰J.W. Rogerson and J.W. McKay, *Psalms* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977) II, 18: 'The Psalmist has broken his part of the covenant, but knows that God keeps faith, that despite his errancy and unworthiness he still belongs to the family of God and can rest his hope in God's faithful love and compassion.' See also, e.g., Nu. 14:19; Pss. 25:7; 103:10-11; 130; Mic 7:18. See, too, Ne 1:5-11; Da 9:4-19 where, though there is no direct link between *hesed* and forgiveness, the appeal for mercy is based upon God's commitment to his people expressed in Dt. 7:7-9 and embodied in his covenant of love.

ensure that the covenant relationship is not destroyed by them.⁵¹

God's desire to maintain the relationship with his people is seen clearly in the prophecy of Hosea, where the relationship is described in terms of a marriage bond (cf. Jer 2:2; 31:32). This relationship should have been characterised by loyalty and devotion, but despite his continuing faithfulness, God did not receive the *hesed* he had a right to expect (e.g. Ho. 6:4).⁵² Through his own experience with his unfaithful wife, the prophet shared with God the pain of rejection and was led, too, to understand that though a wayward wife has broken her side of the marriage covenant, the husband's unfailing love ensures that the relationship will not finally be destroyed. Despite everything, God still loves his bride; thus he will lead her again into the desert (2:14ff), to the place where the relationship began, and there, in that place of new beginnings will make with her a new covenant and bring about a marriage that will last forever. This is seen, too, in Jeremiah 31, where the new covenant is promised as a direct consequence of God's *hesed* (v. 3).⁵³

God's *hesed* thus represents his continued faithfulness and love towards his covenant people. It is that divine commitment to the relationship and the self-imposed obligation that accompanies it, which assures loyal action in accordance with it and which, in graciously bearing with his people's failure, actively seeks the continuance of the union in the face of all that threatens it.

IV. *Hesed* as a Human Response to God

What, then, of the *hesed* which God expects from his people? If *hesed* is to be understood solely in terms of 'kindness',

⁵¹Eichrodt, *Theology* II, 475. See also, Lofthouse, 'Hen and Hesed', 34-35; Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 247-250.

⁵²See below.

⁵³The promise of future restoration based upon Yahweh's *hesed* is seen too in Is. 16:5; 54:5-10.

particularly to one in need, then it must sacrifice mutuality (since whilst God may show kindness he cannot properly be the recipient of kindness from mankind) or adjust its meaning. Stoebe, citing passages such as Jeremiah 2:2 and Hosea 6:4, 6, argues that God does expect *hesed*, which he interprets as 'the free submission of the human heart to God', from his people.⁵⁴ Zobel, following Jepsen, rejects the idea that *hesed* may be shown to God.⁵⁵ Jepsen argues that where *hesed* occurs in Hosea 6:4, 6 it is to be understood in the context of the relationship between Ephraim and Judah. He further points to occurrences of *hesed* in Nehemiah 13:14 and 2 Chronicles 6:42 where he interprets it to mean 'good works', and suggests that this may be the meaning also in Jeremiah 2:2.⁵⁶ This view is, however, somewhat tenuous. Wolff considers that Jepsen's interpretation of Hosea 6:4 is ruled out by the context;⁵⁷ and it is by far the more natural interpretation to understand *hesed* as Israel's proper, if all too transient, devotion to God. The context of v. 6 favours a similar understanding, and the parallel in Hosea 6:6 between *hesed* and 'acknowledgement of God', further supports the view that the term refers to an attitude directed towards God. Jepsen's translation of Jeremiah 2:2 is only tentatively offered, and is certainly not the most natural interpretation.⁵⁸

It is better to interpret these passages in line with the proposed definition of *hesed* as faithful and loyal conduct within the context of a relationship, in this case the covenant between God and his people.⁵⁹ Because of the unequal nature

⁵⁴'Die Bedeutung', 251. *Hesed* may be interpreted as mankind's proper response to God also in 2 Ch. 32:32; 35:26; Neh 13:14.

⁵⁵TDOT V, 61. This view is also expressed by M.V. Fox, 'Jeremiah 2:2 and the "Desert Ideal"', *CBQ* 35 (1973) 443.

⁵⁶'Gnade und Barmherzigkeit', 269.

⁵⁷H.W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 119. See also J.L. Mays, *Hosea* (London: SCM, 1978) 96-8.

⁵⁸Nor is Fox's view that the *hesed* referred to is the kindness shown by God to his people ('Jeremiah 2:2', 442), though this is the interpretation favoured by Clarke, *The Word Hesed*, 193-94.

⁵⁹Mays, *Hosea*, 98 comments: '*Hesed* means the attitude and acts which loyally maintain and implement a given relationship, the covenant in Hosea's usage.'

of the covenant and of the parties concerned, *ḥesed* is expressed in different ways. On God's part it includes faithfulness, love and kindness; Israel, too, is expected to show faithfulness and love, together with obedience to the Law and devotion to the covenant God.⁶⁰

In addition, the members of God's covenant community are to show *ḥesed* in their relationships with one another (e.g. Ho. 12:6(7); Mi. 6:8; Zc. 7:9). *Ḥesed* is one of the qualities displayed by God, which is to be reflected in his people's life together (Je. 9:24). In particular, *ḥesed* is closely associated with *mišpāṭ* (justice),⁶¹ which is demonstrated negatively in the prohibition of oppression, lying, stealing, adultery, murder, etc, and positively in a sense of responsibility towards weaker members of society. Here again *ḥesed* is to be seen as, not merely kindness, but dutiful action: it is the proper response of the people to the *ḥesed* shown them by God; it is also conduct in accordance with the divinely appointed order that allows society to function. We note, further, that the *ḥesed* so often lacking among God's people will be an important feature of the new covenant community.⁶²

V. Conclusion

In summary, we note that at the heart of *ḥesed* is loving commitment within the context of a relationship. It represents both the attitude of loyalty and faithfulness to the relationship and to the related parties, and the corresponding kind and dutiful action, often expressed as help or deliverance, that arises from it. *Ḥesed* is also mutual; those who are shown *ḥesed* are expected, not by law but by social and moral convention, to reciprocate. This has particular implications for the social life of God's people where *ḥesed*, expressed in right conduct towards one another, is expected both because of the mutual relationship established through membership of the covenant

⁶⁰E.g., Dt. 7:9b,12a; Ps. 103:18.

⁶¹See also, e.g., Pss. 33:5; 101:1.

⁶²E.g., Is. 16:5; Ho. 2:19 (21).

community, and as a proper response to the *hesed* shown by God.

In a religious setting God's people are expected to show *hesed* to God as their covenant obligation, expressed in faithfulness, obedience and devotion. They may also rely on the enduring *hesed* which God has bound himself to show to them on the basis of the relationship between them. In this case, God's *hesed* is expressed in a faithful commitment to the relationship, both to act in accordance with it, and to preserve it despite the failure of his covenant partner. It is because of this *hesed*, which seeks to maintain fellowship with his people, that God promises not only forgiveness and restoration, but a new relationship based upon a new covenant, marked by renewed *hesed* within the restored community.



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