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THE *HESED* YAHWEH (THE LOVINGKINDNESS OF GOD) IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ITS ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS

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Abstract

The lovingkindness of God has many phases, and it ranges between human and divine relationships. The misinterpretation of the lovingkindness of God over a sinner and the provision of grace with the forgiveness of sin, pleasing oneself with unrighteousness prevailing among contemporary Christians propel the researchers to research into the topic, *Hesed Yahweh* (The Lovingkindness of God) in the Old Testament and its Implications for the Contemporary Christians. The misunderstanding of the love of God over a sinner gives liberty to continue sinning. It also allows look-warm Christians; therefore, the correct understanding of the lovingkindness of God is needed to correct this menace before faith in God is eroded among Christians. The research shows that *hesed* is used only for parties with some considerable relationship, not just for sinners. *Hesed* showcases an unending love of God toward man. The understanding of *hesed* reveals that the lovingkindness of God is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Hence, Christians should understand that God's loyalty is shown to His people not merely out of a sense of appreciation for their worship or self-interest but because God has determined to be loyal to Christians. The researchers recommend that Christians obey God's will and maintain peaceful co-existence with holy living. Christians should also allow the lovingkindness of God to stimulate one's spirit and act of worship.

Keywords: Lovingkindness, Contemporary, Christians, and Ethics

Introduction

Throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew term *hesed Yahweh* has a range of English equivalent meanings such as loyalty, steadfast love, mercy, goodness, lovingkindness, and great kindness (Harris, 1980:305, Green, 1986:52, Duguid, 2024:2). Depending on the context, a translator can use the above meanings for *hesed*. Couch (2002:1) argued that Miles Coverdale created the biblical word "lovingkindness to convey the depth and meaning of *hesed*". The researcher presents the meaning of the word *hesed*, its theological uses, ethical implications, and some of its significance for contemporary Christians.

The meaning of *hesed*

The term *הסד* (*hesed*), a noun masculine singular, "occurs some two hundred and forty-four times in the Hebrew Bible" (Kohlenberger III and Samson 1998:559-561). Glueck (1967:55) refers to *hesed* in

an obligation perspective as "conduct in accord with a communal relationship of rights and duties, corresponding to a mutually obligatory relationship... principally: reciprocity, mutual assistance, sincerity, friendliness, brotherliness, duty, loyalty, and love." In addition Glueck support that the appropriate meaning of *hesed* included mercy and translated accordingly with the Greek term *eleos* (mercy). However, Brown (1966:338) viewed *הסד* (*hesed*) as "the lovingkindness of God (Deut. 7:9-12, Gen. 24:27; 32)". To him the world *hesed* is "possessive in nature and it is used with the divine attribute of God such as the lovingkindness of God" (Brown, 1966:339). Sakenfeld (2008:495) stated that each of these English equivalents above finds its basis in the nuance of the specific passage and the interpretative understanding of the translator (Gen. 24:27; Exo. 24:6; Ps. 25:10; 40:10-11; Isa. 63:7)."

Therefore, to understand the depth of this term, it is imperative to note that *hesed* is used only for parties with some considerable



relationship. It includes a relationship between relatives such as Sarah and Abraham (Gen. 20:13), Laban and Bethuel to Isaac (Gen. 24:49), and others (Zobel, 1986:46). *Hesed* in Genesis 19:19, 20:13; 21:23 was "not used in the context of casual relationships ... God's love for the nation of Israel. Regarding God's love of Israel, the translation lovingkindness represented the attitude that two parties should have in a covenant relationship" (Richardson 1951). Within its meaning were two essential parts of that attitude: love and loyalty. Some examples of this can be seen here: Then the Lord passed by in front of him and declared, The Lord, the Lord God, gracious and compassionate, slow to wrath, and abounding in lovingkindness (*hesed*) and truth; who keeps lovingkindness (*hesed*) for thousands, who forgives iniquity, sin and transgression; yet He will by no means leave the guilty scot-free; the passage implies that Yahweh is committed into His love towards Israel by been slow to anger and compassionate to accommodate their wrongdoing.

Theological uses of *הסד* (*hesed*)

Theologically, one has to think about the term *הסד* (*hesed*) in a much broader category than from the perspective of linguistics and the etymology of a particular Hebrew word. How did the writers of the Old Testament view the term and use this to express their relationship to the God of Israel? Stuart stated that "*hesed* occurs over two hundred times in the OT and most frequently refers to the certainty of God's concern for people" (Stuart 1991:613). The term is distributed widely in the OT, such as in the historical books and especially the Psalms (Ps. 89; 103, 106; 107, 118 and 136), and it suggests God's loving, merciful dependability (Stuart, 1991:614).

Primarily, the OT uses the term *הסד* (*hesed*) in a theological sense to describe God's covenant relation with Israel (or, as Glueck (1967:55) would say, covenant love). This can best be seen in the giving of the law at Sinai. The ten words in the Decalogue describe Yahweh as being the One Who brings judgment upon those Whom He hates and showing lovingkindness/mercy (*hesed*) upon those Whom He loves (Exod. 20:5-6; Deut. 5:9b-10). It's evident in this passage that God's mercy is conditional or dependent upon Israel being faithful and maintaining the requirements or stipulations of the covenant (Klassen 1992:379). The book of Deuteronomy shows the fulfilment of the promise of land as an accomplishment when they enter Canaan. Still, later on, the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 16:5b) would show that Yahweh would withdraw His mercy when Israel is disobedient. The consequences of rebellion "are life without gladness, the decimation of the people by death with no time for burials or mourning, and exile to an unknown land" (Klassen, 1992:379).

The covenant given at Sinai does not necessarily mean that the *hesed* Yahweh was "completely dependent upon Israel's obedience." The idea of Divine *הסד* (*hesed*) surpasses that of human *הסד* (*hesed*) and offers the gift of forgiveness (Klassen, 1992:379). Looking at the Sinai storyline, the concept of divine love or mercy is "introduced immediately after the conditional statement of the Mosaic Law, in the context of the apostasy of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32-34)" (Klassen, 1992, 380). God's way of

dealing with apostasy is given in Exod. 34:6b-7. God abounds in *הסד* (*hesed*) and is faithful. Even if they turn to idolatry, God does not dissolve the relationship but offers the possibility of forgiveness if they repent (Klassen, 1992:380). The Psalter speaks of God's love or mercy and patience (slow to anger) for His people (Ps. 86:15; 103:8). Nehemiah reminded those of the return that even despite their forefather's disobedience and idolatry, God demonstrated his *הסד* (*hesed*) to them (Neh. 9:16-19). Jonah speaks of those who turn to idolatry and turn their back upon God's covenant loyalty (Jonah 2:8). Yet even Jonah learned that God's *hesed* (mercy, even lovingkindness) extends to the dreaded people of Nineveh, the Gentiles (Jonah 4:2) (Klassen 1992:380).

More so is the sense where (*hesed*) ties into God's mercy and the importance or emphasis of God's people keeping the covenant (Wan 2008:46-47). Good states that God's "continuance of covenant love is a reward for faithfulness to a covenant on the part of the individual" (Good 1962:167). When they fail to be loyal to God, He withdraws His mercy from them and allows them to be punished. The prophets show that the Lord has not abandoned them but that they are being punished for not being faithful to their covenant (Wan, 2008:47). Dyrness (1979:219) sees the message of the OT prophets as denouncing the sin of the children of God. Sin brings grief to a holy God (Isa. 6:5). Amos condemns the social abuses of Israel, and Hosea rails against Israel's syncretism and apostasy. Yet the sin of Judah and Israel is always seen against the backdrop of God's gracious act of deliverance in the past.

Yahweh's mercy is depicted through His covenant, which both Judah and Israel had spurned. God's people broke his covenant and thus brought about his wrath or fury. The prophet Amos (2:9-12) reminds the people that God brought them out of Egypt, but they only responded by following the false prophets and telling the true prophets to be quiet. Their unfaithfulness must be viewed because God had known only them out of all the nations of the earth (Amos 3:1-2) (Dyrness, 1979:219). Hosea depicts God as drawing or leading Israel as a child (Hos. 11:1, 4; Ezek. 16:1-14). The prophet Isaiah is "influenced by the Davidic covenant, and he urges the people to trust" in the promises of God in "quietness and in trust" (Isa. 30:15) (Dyrness, 1979:219). The prophets also offer hope of a coming Messiah (Dyrness, 1979:220). Hosea admonishes Israel to turn/return (in the sense of repentance) to the God who loves (Hos. 3:1-3). They are to return to the law/covenant given at Sinai (Kaiser Jr. 1991:197-199).

Furthermore, the OT prophets show the true "intent of the covenant" and that the covenant purpose is a commitment to the Lord. One who is committed to the law of the Lord practices lovingkindness (*הסד*) (Mic. 6:8). The prophet Ezekiel promised God would give them a new, clean heart (Ezek. 36:26-27). The prophet Jeremiah looked to a time when God would usher in a new covenant, not written on stone but upon their heart (Jer. 31:31-34). A true heart loves Yahweh rather than Baal (Jer. 2:13; 9:10). One finds in the Psalter that the Lord is worthy of our worship and meditation because of who he is and what he does. A genuine commitment to the Lord's covenant influences our ethical behaviour (or lack thereof) towards our brethren and fellow man

(Mic. 6:6-8 – some refer to this passage as the Golden Rule of the OT) (Good 1962:167-168). Amos and Micah condemn the unethical behaviour and treatment towards the righteous and the poor (Amos 2:6; 8:4; Mic. 2:2, 9) (Good, 1962:168). Those people who are faithful under the old covenant would one day lead the Gentiles into the light (Isa. 42:6-7) (Dyrness, 1979:136, 140).

In addition, there is also an eschatological aspect of God's *hesed*. In Psalm 136, the Psalmist states that the Lord's covenant or steadfast love would endure forever. Israel could be assured that God's faithful love would continue. There is the promise made that Yahweh's *hesed* would be forever. There is the promise of the Lord watching over his children who hope in his faithful love (Ps. 33:18, 22). Even the prophets make the promise that there is both covenant love and forgiveness with God (Hos. 14:4) towards his remnant (Mic. 7:18-20) (Good, 1962:167). "There is the plea to save or deliver God's people because of his *hesed* (Ps. 6:4; 44:26) (Good, 1962:167)."

Ethical Implications of the Loving Kindness of God for Contemporary Christians.

Ethics may be defined as the critical study of morality. It consists of a systematic analysis of the nature of man's moral life, including the standards of right and wrong by which his conduct may be guided and the good towards which it may be directed. Ethics is concerned with the practical moral choices men make; on the other hand, it is concerned with the ideal goals and principles they acknowledge to place a claim upon them. Ethics assumes that moral choices are not merely matters of chance; they are not fortuitous and completely unpredictable (Gardner 1960:24-26). Ethics lies at the heart of Christianity. In describing their lives in relation to God, Christians cannot avoid using categories like good and evil, right and wrong. As Christians reflect on ethical questions over the centuries, scholars such as Aristotle, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Bowden have built up a whole body of teachings called Christian ethics. The materials for studying Christian ethics are made up of a great variety of Christian writings. Christian ethics questions are about God, the moral good, moral responsibility and moral judgment. The answers to these questions draw variously on the Christian story told in the Old and New Testaments and understood within the Christian tradition (Bowden 2005:383).

To understand the underlying unity of biblical ethics, one must seek to discover the major ideas and themes which run throughout the Old and New Testaments. Individuals' understanding of unity and diversity within this unity in the scripture will be deepened if humans trace the development of these ideas, particularly the more essential documents representing different periods in biblical history. Gardner opines that the first significant characteristic of Hebrew ethical thought that impresses itself upon one as he examines the morality of the prophets, lawgivers, the sages, and the New Testament is the fact that it is theocentric - God-centered. According to Gardner, the second major characteristic of Hebrew morality is its imperative tone. It is primarily concerned with the question, "What is right?" rather than with the question, "What is

man's chief good?" In the third place, biblical morality is concerned with persons and communities of persons rather than with ideas and patterns in the abstract. It emphasises those acts that affect the neighbour and Israel, not justice and love, as virtues in themselves (Gardner, 1960:24-26).

With the above in view on ethics, below are some of the ethical implications of God's loving kindness for contemporary Christians.

1. Obedience to God's will: The Sermon on the Mount, as submitted by Lohse (1991:72 & 81), demands from contemporary Christians as disciples of Jesus undivided obedience to the will of God. Blessings are bestowed upon those who obediently follow God's commandments. But a curse will fall on those who do not harken to the voice of the Lord and despise his ordinances (Deut. 28). The early Christian ethical instruction attempt to describe more accurately how Christians must go in their daily lives.
2. Peaceful Co-existence: Peace is the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide. Peace on earth cannot be achieved unless personal well-being is secured and men freely and trustingly share the possessions of their inner spirits and talents with one another. A firm determination to reverence other men and peoples and their dignity, as the studied practice of brotherhood, is necessary to establish peace among contemporary Christians. Wogaman & Strong (1996:200-301) stress further that the earthly peace that arises from the love of neighbours symbolises and results from the peace of Christ, which radiates from God the Father. For this reason, Christians are urgently summoned to do in love what the truth requires (Eph. 4:5) and join with all true peacemakers in begging for peace and bringing it about.
3. Steadfastness and Loyalty: This is another ethical implication of the lovingkindness of God on contemporary Christians. The urgent admonitions to faithfulness found in the message of the seven churches permeate the portrayal of the eschatological event given in a dramatically colourful series of alternating pictures. The present ordeal of famine, plague, and cosmic catastrophes, the terror of which becomes increasingly intense, raises the anxiety of who can endure these last times. The call to patient endurance, steadfastness and loyalty to the lovingkindness of God is directed to contemporary Christians (Wogaman & Strong, 1996:192-194).
4. Honesty: Contemporary Christians are enjoined to be honest with God's lovingkindness. Honesty manifests in emotional response and in the behaviour of telling and pursuing the truth, rectifying in advertent deception, and expressing oneself truthfully. Honesty covers a family of virtues, which we might call the virtues of truthfulness (Atkinson 1995:454). In daily social interaction, Ayantayo (2009:76) submit that society regards anything that is substantially or categorically true as honest; that is, a fact that is true to the letter and true to life. Honesty,

therefore, goes with uprightness and straightforwardness indeed. The ethical implication of loving God's kindness to contemporary Christians, irrespective of their challenges or difficulties, is to remain honest in their Christian service.

5. Holy Living: In the Christian tradition, the word "holy" is most commonly used as an adjective in terms such as Holy Name, Holy Word, Holy Bible or Holy Spirit (Bowden, 2005:578). God is holy. This description dominates the Old Testament picture of God. God's holiness cannot tolerate impurity or sinfulness. Christian ethics and theology are inextricably linked. It describes how God's holy people should live (Green, 2011:361-362). In this regard, God's loving kindness propels contemporary Christians to maintain the holiness of God within and without as they live daily and even in their relationship with others.
6. Show compassion to the needy: This is another ethical implication of the lovingkindness of God for the contemporary Christian. The Old Testament recounts God's compassion with thanksgiving and praise while expressing the confidence and hope that this divine compassion will continue to be upon God's people throughout all time. The compassion God shows to his people in the Old Testament models the compassionate justice God's prophets encourage his people to embody. This interpretation requires contemporary Christians to imitate, albeit imperfectly, Jesus Christ's divinely human, compassionate ministry to the lost, hungry, suffering and poor (Green, 2011:157).
7. Show genuine love: Jesus's second greatest commandment was that we love our neighbours as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39). This puts the self on a level with neighbours. It makes self-love and self-care equal with our responsibility to love and care for others (Norman, 2004:30). The book of Leviticus, as submitted by Green, is the source of the commands to love neighbour and resident aliens in the same way as one loves oneself (Lev. 19:18, 34). The synoptic Gospels emphasise the command's unity to love God and neighbour. Jesus also cites the "Golden Rule" (Matthew 7:12), corroborated by Immanuel Kant's theory of categorisation (Green, 2011:490-491). Suppose anyone has a problem with anyone in the Christian community. In that case, the person should try to work it out in a loving communication (Lohse, 1991:77). Contemporary Christians are called to emulate this in their ethical response to God's lovingkindness.
8. Holding fast to the declaration of our faith: This is another ethical implication of the lovingkindness of God for Christians in the contemporary age of banditry, kidnapping, economic meltdown, pressure from outside the community and temptations from within it. Christians were called to hold fast to the confession of faith, even if it resulted in their enduring severe suffering or possibly

even death. Holding fast to the confession shows its true colours in discipleship to Christ. He is held up as an example to the community as the "pointer of our salvation" (Heb. 2:10). Therefore, Christians must adhere to his word and follow it in order not to miss the salvation Christ has won for them (Lohse, 1991:186-187).

9. Gratitude for what God has done: This ethical implication reveals the appropriate response to a benevolently given gift. It is a happy emotion, a delight to have what is given and to receive it, particularly from the giver. The heart of the Christian message submitted by Atkinson is about the gift God has freely and benevolently given to his people- the gift of eternal life, liberation from sin and death, admission to fellowship with himself, and participation in his kingdom. For this reason, gratitude should be one of the contemporary Christian virtues for what God has done through his loving kindness (Atkinson, 1995:418-419).
10. Exercise justice: God intended the earth with everything in it for all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the guidance of justice and charity, created goods should be in plenty for all in an equitable manner. Wogaman & Strong(1996:299) submitted that the doctors and fathers of the church held this opinion, teaching that men are indebted to come to the relief of the deprived and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. Justice is a worthy dimension of social relationships. The fundamental question to be considered is, "What constitutes justice in social relationships? What is it for a person or group of persons to be treated equally (Atkinson, 1995:15-17)? In his contribution, Magure (1993:127) opines that every viable society knows with Aristotle that justice "holds the city together". Nothing but justice will allow Israel to survive and thrive, and what is true for Israel is seen as accurate for the world.

Significance of *hesed*

In the course of this research, the researcher came out with the following significant of *hesed*:

1. *Hesed* implies personal commitment and involvement in a relationship beyond the rule of law.
2. God's loyalty is shown to His people not merely out of a sense of appreciation for their worship or self-interest but because God has determined to be loyal to them.
3. *Hesed* stresses the certainty of God's unfailing willingness to help and comfort
4. It also stresses loyalty among humanity
5. *Hesed* showcases an unending love of God toward man
6. The understanding of *hesed* reveals that the lovingkindness of God as fulfilled in Jesus has been from the beginning of creation
7. The *hesed* of God anchors His enduring attribute towards men
8. The *hesed* of God is the centre of our salvation

9. The *hesed* of God is our saving grace while in distress (Psa. 69:17)
10. The *hesed* of God should be our plea in prayer (Psa. 119:159)
11. The *hesed* of God should stimulate our spirit and act of worship (Psa. 63:3; 138:2)
12. *Hesed* showcases God's commitment to saving humanity

Conclusion

This research has looked into the meaning of *hesed* as an unending love of God towards humankind. The word *hesed* goes beyond casual relationships because the lovingkindness of God never fails. This research also establishes four theological uses of the word *hesed*, which include God's covenant relation with Israel, God's mercy and the importance or emphasis of God's people keeping the covenant, the OT prophets show the true intent of the covenant, and that covenant purpose is the commitment to the Lord, and concludes that there is also an eschatological aspect of *hesed* *Yahweh* which the Psalmist states that the Lord's covenant or steadfast love would endure forever.

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