

Mercy in the Old Testament

What does “mercy” mean? Forgiveness? Not punishing? Lowering standards? Pity?
The OT has 3 words close to “mercy”: *Rahamim* (a noun), *Hanan* (a verb), *Hesed* (a noun)

1. “Rahamim,” the plural of *raham*, “womb” Best translated “compassion”
Denotes the love between blood family members, the sympathy between those who came forth from the same womb (*raham*), or the visceral love of a mother for a child.

Psa. 79:8 *Do not remember against us the iniquities of our forefathers; let thy compassions (rahamim) come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low.*

2. “Hanan” verbal form of noun *hên*, “grace” or “favor”
“to show grace or favor toward someone,” sometimes translated “show mercy” or “be merciful.”

Psa. 6:2 *Be gracious (hanan) to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are troubled. (Basis for the name “Hannah”)*

3. “Hesed,” noun, “the bond of loyalty/affection between covenant partners,” “covenant fidelity”
Traditionally translated *eleos*, *misericordia*, mercy; or “steadfast love” or similar

4. God names himself with “Hesed”

And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, compassionate (rahamim) and gracious (hanûn), slow to anger, and abundant in mercy (hesed) and truth, keeping mercy (hesed) for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; yet 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. (Exod 34:6-7)

5. “Hesed”/“Mercy” is covenantal

“When in the Old Testament the word *hesed* is used of the Lord, this always occurs in connection with the covenant that God established with Israel.”

—St. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* §52

6. But what is a covenant? *Extension of kinship by oath=Swearing someone into your family*
Thus, covenant rituals often involve blood and meals

We share one blood now

We eat family meals together now: Gen 31:53-54, Exod 24:1-8, Matt 26:26-29

7. *Hesed* (mercy) & *Berîth* (covenant)

Hesed is the personal commitment, the substance of the covenant.

Deut. 7:9 *Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant (berith) and mercy (hesed) with those who love him ...*

Psa. 89:28 *My mercy (hesed) I will keep for him for ever, and my covenant (berith) will stand firm for him.*

Is. 55:3 *I will make with you an everlasting covenant (berith), my mercies (hesed) for David.*

8. Mercy-*Hesed* in the Psalms

Hesed occurs 250X in the OT, 130X in Psalms, 4th noun after God, LORD, soul, land

Psalm 136:

- 1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy endures for ever.
- 3 O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy endures for ever.
- 13 To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy (*hesed*) endures for ever:
- 14 And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy endures for ever:
- 15 But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy endures for ever.
- 16 To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy endures for ever...
- 26 O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy endures for ever.

9. Thanksgiving (*Todah*) Psalms

Thanksgiving Psalms were for the Thanksgiving Sacrifice (*zebach todah* in Hebrew)

The Thanksgiving Sacrifice (*Todah*) Lev 7:11-14:

- (1) Not offered for atonement or reparation.
- (2) Offered in *thanks* for a *specific act of deliverance*
- (3) Animal eaten by the worshippers.
- (4) Many fine breads offered
- (5) Everything eaten before dawn.

References to the *Todah* Sacrifice

Psa. 50:14 Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High;

Psa. 56:12 My vows to thee I must perform, O God; I will render thank offerings to thee.

Psa. 116:17 I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.

The *Todah* Cycle

Lament

- (1) Distress (Ps 22:6-18)
- (2) Cry to God (Ps 22:19-21)
- (3) Vow to offer *Todah* (Ps 22:22)
- (4) *Act of Salvation (often not explicitly described)*

Praise

- (5) Paying of the vow (Ps 22:25)
- (6) Feast, including the poor (Ps 22:26)
- (7) Public testimony (Ps 22:23-24)

10. Thanks for *Hesed* is the Basic Theme of the Psalms

“Give *thanks* to the LORD, for he is good, his *hesed* (mercy) endures forever ...”

Psalms 113-118 are and were recited at Passover

This helps us understand the Eucharist:

New Passover

New *Todah*

Perpetual thanksgiving for God’s mercy in Jesus

11. What is Mercy?

Strengthening of marriage and family bonds

Evangelization, inviting people into covenant family

Confession, reconciling children back into family

God’s mercy restores family bonds, not eliminates them!

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22 ¶ To the choirmaster: according to The Hind of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

1 My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

2 O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

3 Yet thou art holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

4 In thee our fathers trusted; they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.

5 To thee they cried, and were saved; in thee they trusted, and were not disappointed.

6 But I am a worm, and no man; scorned by men, and despised by the people.

7 All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads;

8 "He committed his cause to the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

9 Yet thou art he who took me from the womb; thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breasts.

10 Upon thee was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God.

11 Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help.

12 Many bulls encompass me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

13 they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast;

15 my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; thou dost lay me in the dust of death.

16 Yea, dogs are round about me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet —

17 I can count all my bones — they stare and gloat over me;

18 they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots.

19 But thou, O LORD, be not far off! O thou my help, hasten to my aid!

20 Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog!

21 Save me from the mouth of the lion, my afflicted soul from the horns of the wild oxen!

22 Then I will tell of thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee.

{God's act of salvation not described, but now we abruptly shift to thanksgiving}

23 You who fear the LORD, praise him! all you sons of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you sons of Israel!

24 For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him.

25 From thee comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live for ever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

28 For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

29 Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and he who cannot keep himself alive.

30 Posterity shall serve him; men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation,

31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, that he has wrought it.

Cry to God

Situation of Distress

More Situation of Distress

More Crying to God

The vow to offer *Today*

Public Thanks

Payment of the vow

Feasting with the Poor

More Public Thanksgiving

Mercy in the New Testament

1. What Does “Mercy” Mean in the NT?

Matt. 9:13 *Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy (eleos), and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

Hosea 6:6: *“For I desire mercy (hesed) and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. (Also in Mat 12:7)*

Matt 12:7 *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy (eleos) and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.*

“justice, mercy, and faith,” are clearly the OT triad *mishpat* (judgment), *hesed* (mercy), and *emet* (truth or faith). Covenantal terms.

2. Mercy in the Magnificat

46 My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;

49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. (1000 generations, Exod 34:6-7)

51 He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,

52 he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”

3. Mercy in the Benedictus

68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people,

69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,

70 as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

71 that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us;

72 to perform the mercy (eleos, hesed) promised to our fathers,

and to remember his holy covenant (berith),

73 the oath (sheva) which he swore to our father Abraham ...

See how “mercy,” “covenant,” and “oath” are roughly synonymous!

4. Mercy and Almsgiving

In the NT, the word for charitable gifts is *eleêmosunê*, based on *eleos*, meaning “mercifulness”
Eleêmosunê eventually contracts to our word “alms”

Matt. 6:2 *“Thus, when you give alms (lit. “do mercifulnesses”), sound no trumpet before you ... 3 But when you give alms (“do mercies”), do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms (“mercies, mercifulnesses”) may be in secret...*

5. Almsgiving Commended in NT

Acts 10:2 [The Centurian Cornelius was] a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God.

Acts 10:4 And he stared at him in terror, and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

Acts 10:31 saying, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.

6. Why Mercy and Almsgiving?

a. Mercy needs to be concrete: Psalm 136:

13 to him who divided the Red Sea in sunder, for his mercy endures for ever;

14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his mercy endures for ever;

15 but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, for his mercy endures for ever;

b. Mercy, as a covenantal category, must be personal

Alms were oriented toward building relationships

Impersonal giving is not sufficient; part of the purpose of alms is to restore and unite the impoverished person with the rest of the community.

Alms are like incarnations of mercy, analogous to the Eucharist

7. The Eucharist and Almsgiving

Luke 22:20: "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood" [i.e. consisting of my blood].

Luke 22:19: "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Compare to the Magnificat: "54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

The Eucharist is the covenant, the Eucharist is the *hesed*-mercy.

8. The Eucharist and Almsgiving

Therefore both the Eucharist and Alms are a kind of concretization of mercy

"We can say that the biblical jubilee was a 'jubilee of mercy,' because it was lived in the sincere search for the good of the needy brother." Yet, "if the jubilee doesn't reach pockets, it isn't a jubilee." Pope Francis, Wed. Audience 2016/02/10

9. Eucharist, Mercy, and Almsgiving

Modern depersonalization of alms and charity harms the *covenantal* nature of mercy
The gathering of alms in Mass is a sacred act:

Acts 2:44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts...

Acts 4:34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.

As Church spread, the collection took the place of this "charismatic communism."

Together with *evangelization* and *confession*, *almsgiving* has a special place in the year of mercy.

Mercy and Alms



AN EXPLORATION FOR THE YEAR OF MERCY

What Does “Mercy” Mean in the NT?



- Matt. 9:13 *“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy (eleos), and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”*
- Hosea 6:6: *“For I desire mercy (hesed) and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.”*
- Also in Matt 12:7:

What does Mercy Mean in the NT



- “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy (eleos) and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.*”
- “justice, mercy, and faith,” are clearly the OT triad *mishpat* (judgment), *hesed* (mercy), and *emet* (truth or faith). Covenantal terms.
- Pharisees were not really righteous people!
- Used law to get around covenant fidelity (mercy)

Mercy in the Magnificat (Evening Prayer)



- *Luke 1:46 My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
- ***48 for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.***
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
- ***49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.***
- *50 And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. (1000 gen's, Exod 34:6-7)*

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- *51 He has shown strength with his arm, **he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,***
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- *54 He has helped his servant Israel, **in remembrance of his mercy,***
- *55 as he spoke to our fathers, **to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”***

Mercy in the Benedictus (Morning Prayer)



- 68 “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people,
- 69 and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
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and from the hand of all who hate us.**

Mercy in the Benedictus



- 72 to perform the mercy (*hesed*) promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant (*berith*),
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Mercy and Almsgiving



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- Mercy, as a covenantal category, must be *personal*
- Alms were oriented toward building relationships
- Impersonal giving is not sufficient; part of the purpose of alms is to restore and unite the impoverished person with the rest of the community.
- Alms are like incarnations of mercy, analogous to the Eucharist

The Eucharist and Almsgiving



- **Luke 22:20:** *“This cup is the New Covenant in my blood” [i.e. consisting of my blood].*
- **Luke 22:19:** *“This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”*
- **Compare to the Magnificat:** *“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”*
- **The Eucharist is the covenant, the Eucharist is the *hesed*-mercy.**

The Eucharist and Almsgiving



- Therefore both the Eucharist and Alms are a kind of concretization or incarnation of mercy, even if of a radically different order.
- Thus Medieval religious art correlated the two:





Eucharist, Mercy, and Almsgiving



- Modern depersonalization of alms and charity harms the *covenantal* nature of mercy, which is always oriented to the building of familial relations.
- The gathering of alms in Mass is a sacred act:
- *Acts 2:44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts...*

The Eucharist, Mercy, and Almsgiving



- *Acts 4:34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.*
- As Church spread, the collection took the place of this “charismatic communism.”
- Alms have a privileged place as expression of mercy,
- But also fostering:
 - Evangelization
 - Sacrament of Reconciliation.