

**WORD STUDY:
MERCY OR *CHECED* IN HEBREW**

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to study the Hebrew word *checed*. *Checed* is spelled various ways in the Hebrew Old Testament. Sometimes it is spelled *hesed* or *chesed* or some variant. The word *checed* appears 248 times in the Hebrew Old Testament according to a search of Strong's Concordance via the Blue Letter Bible internet search program. Strong's Concordance assigns OT # 02617 to *checed*.

According to the Blue Letter Bible internet search program the following translations of the word *checed* are made in the King James Bible (unless otherwise indicated, all references are from the King James Bible): "mercy" occurs 149 times, "kindness" occurs 40 times, "lovingkindness" occurs 30 times, "goodness" occurs 12 times, "kindly" occurs 5 times, "merciful" occurs 4 times, "favor" occurs 3 times, "good" occurs 1 time, "goodliness" occurs 1 time, "pity" occurs 1 time, "reproach" occurs 1 time, and "wicked thing" occurs 1 time for a total of 248 occurrences of the word *checed* in the Hebrew Old Testament.

The above analysis indicates the meaning of this word, which via the English translation, overwhelmingly invokes the idea of a positive display of affection. In contrast, the translation to "reproach" and "wicked thing" indicate a negative aspect of the word. The remainder of this paper will seek to further illuminate the meaning of *checed* via the analysis in English of various Old Testament verses.

ONE OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

God is depicted in the Old Testament numerous ways, and He has various attributes. *Checed* is used many times to describe one of His favorite attributes. Micah 7:18 says, "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy." The NIV translates *checed* as "mercy" while the NASB translates it as "unchanging love". Notice that the Lord delights in mercy or unchanging love. Hence, He takes great pleasure in showing mercy. Parallelism can be seen vividly in this passage. God pardons iniquity and passes by transgression. He does not retain anger and delights in mercy. Mercy is contrasted with anger in this verse. His anger toward His people is short lived in comparison to His mercy. Since mercy is an attribute of God and God cannot change, He will always be a God of mercy. Certainly, He is a God of justice and judgment; but He is many times portrayed as rich in mercy. Mercy, love, truth and forgiveness are closely linked when describing God and His attributes. The extent of God's love and mercy are indescribable and unfathomable to the human mind.

Describing God's many attributes, the Psalms mention *chesed* more than any other book in the Old Testament – more than 125 times. His paths are described as mercy in Psalm 25:10. His lovingkindness is excellent according to Psalm 36:10. In Psalm 86:5,

mercy and truth have met together in the Lord. God is full of compassion and plenteous in mercy in Psalm 86:15.

Psalm 107 is an interesting case study in inclusion or book ending which gives emphasis upon God's *cheched*. *Cheched* is used 6 times in 43 verses. Four of the 6 times it is used are examples of the literary technique of inclusion. Verses 8, 15, 21, and 31 all read exactly the same way, "Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!" The NIV translates *cheched* as "unfailing love" while the NASB translates it as "loving kindness". Emphasis upon God's goodness/unfailing love/loving kindness is abundant in this passage. He is to be praised for His goodness. His faithful works of goodness for His people are stressed to show how worthy He is of praise.

A REQUIREMENT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Notice Micah 6:8, "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" The NIV translates *cheched* in this verse as "mercy" and the NASB translates it "kindness". In Micah chapter 6, the Lord is speaking directly through the prophet Micah. He has a contention with His people, Israel. The Lord uses rhetorical questions to cause His people to think about their actions. He outlines 3 requirements for His people: to conduct themselves in a just or honest manner, to love mercy or kindness, and to walk humbly. If mercy is one of God's favorite attributes, it follows that He would want his people to favor mercy. God says his people should "focus their attention" in three areas and one of the three is showing kindness or mercy.

Proverbs 21:21 further illustrates this concept, "He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, righteousness, and honour." The NIV translates *cheched* as "love" while the NASB translates it as "loyalty". Notice righteousness and mercy/love/loyalty are closely tied together. It is interesting that the NASB supplies the word loyalty instead of mercy or love. However, when one thinks of love, he must realize love is shown via action - not just words or thoughts. When God shows love or mercy, He does so by a certain action. Loyalty invokes the idea of action because if one is loyal, they have been faithful. God is loyal to us and expects us to be loyal to others. Being loyal or faithful is an expression of love or mercy. Maybe this could be part of the reason why the NASB translators choose the word loyal for this passage. God is a righteous and merciful God; and in this verse, He says the man who imitates His characteristics will find true fulfillment. Several times, mercy is emphasized as a requirement for blessing and approval from God in this book of wisdom. Other verses to consider are Proverbs 3:3; 11:17; and 20:28.

UNMERITED MERCY

Cheched occurs for the first time in the Old Testament in Genesis 19:19, "Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die." The NIV translates *cheched* as "kindness" in this passage while the NASB translates it as "lovingkindness".

The context of the passage is of God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. He sent two angels to destroy the city and deliver Lot and his family. Lot recognizes the angels have spared his life and is speaking to them about where he wants to go when he leaves the city. He realizes the favor shown to him and describes the "mercy" shown to him as more than just mercy, but "magnified" mercy. His life has been saved; and thus, he has been spared the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. He realizes the mercy is not merited by referring to an act of grace. Thus, grace and mercy are closely tied together in this passage to describe God's decision to spare Lot and his family. Both are seen as unmerited and undeserving. Genesis 32:10 is another example of Jacob realizing God's unmerited mercy. Numerous other Old Testament passages speak of the unmerited mercy of God (see 1 Chronicles 16:34; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 103:8).

MERITED MERCY

Observe Numbers 14:18, "The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation." The NIV translates *checed* as "love" in this passage while the NASB translates it as "lovingkindness". *Checed* occurs in this passage and is tied to the longsuffering and forgiving nature of God. A close study of the chapter reveals a different aspect of His mercy than that seen in the previously mentioned passages in Genesis. It seems to identify something different than simply His unmerited grace. The Israelites, who were already benefactors of God's mercy and grace, had made God extremely angry. He was ready to disinherit them (not allow them to partake of the blessings of the promised land as a nation) and make a nation out of Moses alone. Moses pleads for God's mercy and reminds Him of the surrounding nations who will say He is not able to deliver on His promises. So, instead of destroying the entire nation, God in mercy spares the nation but declares that those individuals who have seen his wondrous works and disobeyed Him would not see the land. Thus, God is seen showing mercy on a national level but not an individual level. Again, unmerited grace and mercy is described for the nation of Israel but not for the undeserving individuals who spurned God's love and provision via wicked works and murmuring against the Lord. However, in one sense here, God is seen showing mercy to those who are obedient i.e. Moses and Caleb, in verses 12, 20-24. Consider Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 5:10; 7:9, 12; 2 Chronicles 6:14; Nehemiah 1:5; 13:14; and Psalm 25:10 for further study on the aspect of merited mercy.

SUMMARY

God is certainly depicted in the Old Testament as full of *checed*. The unchanging love, kindness and mercy of God are clearly illustrated to Israel. He reminds them and us, over and over, that He is worthy of praise because of the mercy He has bestowed upon mankind. His very nature centers on His mercy/lovingkindness/goodness; and He wants those who believe in Him to also center their lives on mercy.

God's mercy as well as His grace are illustrated in two basic ways: merited and unmerited. First and foremost, God's mercy is unmerited. No man has any way to claim he has won God's approval for salvation via works. However, those who have trusted God for salvation can receive further mercy. God delights in His people acting like He acts. He

wants to be gracious to those who are obedient to Him. Unfortunately, many times in the Old Testament, Israel rejected God's love and tested His mercy. The lesson for us is that we should recognize and praise God for His unmerited grace and mercy and seek to win more mercy which He wishes to bestow.