

Mercy in the Old and New Testaments

Vocabulary

In Hebrew, there are three key terms:

- Ḥen (חֵן) – kindness or favor
- Ḥesed (חֶסֶד) – loving kindness
- Raḥmîm (רַחֲמִים) – mercy

• In Greek, there is one key term:

- Eleos (ἔλεος) – mercy
- Eleéō (ἐλεέω) – to have mercy
- Eleēmōn (ἐλεήμων) – merciful

Old Testament Covenants

The Lord shows his kindness (*ḥen*) when he establishes his various covenants.

- The Lord showed his kindness to Adam and Eve after their original sin by providing a promise of salvation (Gen 3:15).
- The Lord showed his kindness to Noah when he warned him of the coming flood.
 - But Noah found favor (*ḥen*) with the LORD. (Gen. 6:8)
- The Lord showed his favor to Abraham when the birth of Isaac was foretold by the visitors.
 - Abraham said, “My lord, if I find favor (*ḥen*) with you, do not pass by your servant. (Gen. 18:3)

The destruction of Sodom

Abraham asked the Lord for mercy in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

- Abraham said: “Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous people in the city; would you really sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people within it?”
- The LORD replied: “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” (Gen. 18:23-26)

As there were not even 10 righteous people in Sodom, the Lord sent angels to bring Lot and his household out of Sodom before it was destroyed.

- "You have already shown favor (*ḥen*) to your servant, doing me the great kindness of saving my life. But I cannot flee to the hills, or the disaster will overtake and kill me. (Gen. 19:19) Lot fled to the town of Zoar.

Forgiveness of wrongs

The story of Cain and Abel showed a lack of mercy and forgiveness between brothers.

The story of Joseph and his brothers presents an example of forgiveness, even after Joseph was sold into slavery:

- “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. But now do not be distressed, and do not be angry with yourselves for having sold me here. It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you.” (Gen. 45:4-5)

Moses and the Commandments

The character of the Lord's mercy is described in the First Commandment.

- “For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their ancestors' wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; but showing love (*hesed*) down to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”
(Exod. 20:5-6)

Moses and the Commandments

When ratifying the covenant, the Lord appeared before Moses and the people:

- The LORD came down in a cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name, “LORD.” So the LORD passed before him and proclaimed: The LORD, the LORD, a God gracious and merciful (*raḥmîm*), slow to anger and abounding in love (*ḥesed*) and fidelity, continuing his love for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but bringing punishment for their parents' wickedness on children and children's children to the third and fourth generation! (Exod. 34:5-7)

Moses and the Commandments

- The Ark of the Covenant is a place to ask for mercy from the Lord. The covering of the Ark is called the mercy seat or propitiary. It is the footstool of the Lord.
 - Set the cover on the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies. (Exod 26:34 NAB)
 - You shall put the mercy seat (כַּפֹּרֶת – *kappōret*) on the ark of the covenant in the most holy place. (Exod 26:34 NRSV)
 - “We have heard of it in Ephrathah; we have found it in the fields of Jaar. Let us enter his dwelling; let us worship at his footstool.” “Arise, LORD, come to your resting place, you and your mighty ark.” (Ps. 132:6-8)

The promise to David

- When David wants to build a house for the Ark of the Covenant, the Lord promises to build a house for David. The Lord will raise up his descendant to reign after him.
 - He it is who shall build a house for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. If he does wrong, I will reprove him with a human rod and with human punishments; but I will not withdraw my favor (*hesed*) from him as I withdrew it from Saul who was before you. Your house and your kingdom are firm forever before me; your throne shall be firmly established forever. (2 Sam. 7:13-16)

The sin of David

David sinned when he took Bathsheba and arranged for Uriah to be killed. Nathan told David the parable about the rich man who took the poor man's ewe lamb.

- Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan answered David: "For his part, the LORD has removed your sin. You shall not die, (2 Sam. 12:13)

Mercy in the Prophets

Isaiah describes the tenderness of the Lord surrounding the Babylonian Exile:

- For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great tenderness (*rahmîm*) I will take you back. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; But with enduring love (*hesed*) I take pity on you, says the LORD, your redeemer. Though the mountains fall away and the hills be shaken, My love (*hesed*) shall never fall away from you nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says the LORD, who has mercy (*rahmîm*) on you. (Isa. 54:7-8, 10)

Mercy in the Prophets

Before the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah warns the people:

- When you proclaim all these words to this people and they ask you: “Why has the LORD pronounced all this great disaster against us? What is our crime? What sin have we committed against the LORD, our God?”-- you shall answer them: It is because your ancestors have forsaken me-- oracle of the LORD-- and followed other gods that they served and worshiped; but me they have forsaken, and my law they did not keep. And you have done worse than your ancestors. Here you are, every one of you, walking in the stubbornness of your evil heart instead of listening to me. I will throw you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your ancestors have known; there you can serve other gods day and night because I will not show you mercy. (Jer. 16:10-13)

Mercy in the Prophets

Jeremiah also promises hope. After the medicinal effect of the exile, the Lord will restore Israel to the land:

- The song of joy, the song of gladness, the song of the bridegroom, the song of the bride, the song of those bringing thank offerings to the house of the LORD: "Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good; God's love (*hesed*) endures forever." For I will restore the fortunes of this land as they were in the beginning, says the LORD. (Jer. 33:11)
- I will take pity (*rahmîm*) on you, so that he will have pity on you and let you return to your land. (Jer. 42:12)

Mercy in the Prophets

- Ezekiel 16 gives a detailed description of Israel as an abandoned child found by the Lord who loved her and clothed her. Israel became proud and vain, playing the harlot, until the Lord punished her for her iniquity. Brought utterly low, the Lord will once again renew the covenant:
 - But I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were young; I will set up an everlasting covenant with you. For I will re-establish my covenant with you, that you may know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be ashamed, and never again open your mouth because of your disgrace, when I pardon you for all you have done-- oracle of the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 16:60-63)

Mercy in the Psalms

Mercy appears over 120 times in the book of Psalms.

- The Lord is personified as merciful:
 - Merciful (*rahmîm*) and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger, abounding in mercy (*hesed*). (Ps. 103:8)
 - One thing God has said; two things I have heard: Strength belongs to God; so too, my Lord, does mercy (*hesed*), For you repay each man according to his deeds. (Ps. 62:12-13)
 - Love (*hesed*) and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss. Truth will spring from the earth; justice will look down from heaven. Yes, the LORD will grant his bounty; our land will yield its produce. Justice will march before him, and make a way for his footsteps. (Ps. 85:11-14)

Mercy in the Psalms

- Mercy is shown to Israel:
 - Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, his mercy (*hesed*) endures forever.
Let Israel say: his mercy (*hesed*) endures forever.
Let the house of Aaron say, his mercy (*hesed*) endures forever.
Let those who fear the LORD say, his mercy (*hesed*) endures forever. (Ps. 118:1-4)
 - Praise the LORD, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples!
His mercy (*hesed*) for us is strong; the faithfulness of the LORD is forever.
Hallelujah! (Ps. 117:1-2)

Mercy in the Psalms

- Mercy is described in the life of King David:
 - I will sing of your mercy (*hesed*) forever, LORD proclaim your faithfulness through all ages. For I said, "My mercy (*hesed*) is established forever; my faithfulness will stand as long as the heavens. I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: I will make your dynasty stand forever and establish your throne through all ages." Selah (Ps. 89:2-5)
 - Thus I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing praises to your name. You have given great victories to your king, and shown mercy (*hesed*) to his anointed, to David and his posterity forever. (Ps. 18:50-51)

Mercy in the Psalms

- Mercy is experienced when David confesses his sins:
 - Blessed is the one whose fault is removed, whose sin is forgiven. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, in whose spirit is no deceit.
 - Then I declared my sin to you; my guilt I did not hide. I said, "I confess my transgression to the LORD," and you took away the guilt of my sin.
 - Many are the sorrows of the wicked one, but mercy (*hesed*) surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD. Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; exult, all you upright of heart. (Ps. 32:1-2, 5, 10-11)

Mercy in the Psalms

- Mercy is experienced when David confesses his sins:
 - Have mercy (*ḥen*) on me, God, in accord with your merciful love (*ḥesed*); in your abundant compassion (*raḥmîm*) blot out my transgressions. Thoroughly wash away my guilt; and from my sin cleanse me. For I know my transgressions; my sin is always before me.
 - A clean heart create for me, God; renew within me a steadfast spirit.
 - My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn. (Ps 51:3-5, 12, 19)

Mercy in the Psalms

- David's confidence in God's mercy:
 - The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures he makes me lie down; to still waters he leads me; he restores my soul. He guides me along right paths for the sake of his name. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me. You set a table before me in front of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Indeed, goodness and mercy (*hesed*) will pursue me all the days of my life; I will dwell in the house of the LORD for endless days. (Ps. 23:1-6)

Mercy in Luke

- Mary's Canticle (Magnificat)
 - His mercy (*eleos*) is from age to age to those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart. (Lk. 1:50-52)
- Zechariah's Canticle (Benedictus)
 - He has raised up a horn for our salvation within the house of David his servant, even as he promised through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old: salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy (*eleos*) to our fathers and to be mindful of his holy covenant (Lk. 1:69-72)

Mercy in Luke

- Jesus taught the great commandments: to love God and neighbor. When asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the story of the man going from Jerusalem to Jericho who fell in with robbers.
 - Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim? He answered, “The one who treated him with mercy (*eleos*).” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Lk. 10:25-37)

Mercy in Matthew

- In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches about mercy:
 - Blessed are the merciful (*eleēmōn*), for they will be shown mercy (*eleéō*). (Matt. 5:7)
- When dining with tax collectors, Jesus is condemned by the Pharisees. He responds:
 - He heard this and said, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy (*eleos*), not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." (Matt. 9:12-13)

Mercy expressed in forgiveness

Forgiveness is an act of mercy

- In the Our Father, we pray:
 - forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; (Matt. 6:12)
- Jesus repeats the necessity to forgive in prayer:
 - When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance, so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your transgressions." (Mk. 11:25)
- Jesus demonstrates this teaching at the time of his death:
 - When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." They divided his garments by casting lots. (Lk. 23:33-34)

Mercy expressed in forgiveness

- When curing the paralytic man, Jesus teaches about the power to heal and the power to forgive sin:
 - Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth"-- he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home." He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this." (Mk. 2:1-9)
- This power was communicated to the Apostles:
 - Jesus breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." (Jn. 20:22-23)

Mercy expressed in forgiveness

- St. Paul speaks of forgiveness as central to the mystery of Christ in the Ephesians Canticle:
 - Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.
 - In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth. (Eph. 1:3-10)