

# HESED IN THE BIBLE

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THIS VOLUME IS GRATEFULLY DEDICATED  
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## CHAPTER I

# *Ḥesed* as Human Conduct — Its Secular Meaning

### I. A PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT — THOSE WHO PRACTICE *ḤESED*

To clarify the conceptual meaning of the word in its secular sense in the Hebrew Bible, we need first determine the persons to whom the expression refers. Proceeding from the actual usage of the word we shall fix, to the extent possible, its real and implied meaning.

#### A. THE *ḤESED*-RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELATIVES AND RELATED TRIBES

In Gen. 47:29 (J<sup>1</sup>)<sup>1</sup> Jacob, about to die, asks his son Joseph, to swear to him that he will show him *ḥesed* וַאֲמַת חֶסֶד. Abraham asks his wife, Sarah, to render *ḥesed* to him, Gen. 20:13 (E<sup>2</sup>). Boaz praises Ruth, Ruth 3:10, for the *ḥesed* she is showing her husband and his family. Naomi, Ruth 2:20, blesses her kinsman, Boaz, for having shown *ḥesed* to Ruth.<sup>2</sup> Abraham's servant, Gen 24:49 (J<sup>1</sup>), asks the family of Nahor, Abraham's brother,<sup>3</sup> whether they are willing to show *ḥesed* וַאֲמַת חֶסֶד to his master. Saul, I Sam. 15:6 (S<sup>b</sup>) recalls the *ḥesed* which the friendly and related Kenites<sup>4</sup> had demonstrated toward the Israelites when they went up from Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> In the differentiation of sources I mainly followed Steuernagel, *Lehrbuch der Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Tübingen, 1912).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ch. I, pp. 40 f.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gen. 24:15, 47, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Judg. 4:11; 1:16; 5:24; Num. 10:29 f.



## B. BETWEEN HOST AND GUEST

The men whom Lot receives as his guests, Gen. 19:19 (J<sup>1</sup>), show him *hesed*. Rahab renders *hesed* to the spies who found refuge in her house, Josh. 2:12, 14 (E<sup>2</sup>), and they swear to do *hesed* to her and her family. Abimelech asks Abraham to vow to show him the same *hesed* which he had displayed to Abraham, Gen. 21:23 (E<sup>2</sup>), in permitting him to sojourn in his land.

## C. BETWEEN ALLIES AND THEIR RELATIVES

David, reminding Jonathan of the Yahweh-covenant between them, I Sam. 20:8 (S<sup>b</sup>), entreats Jonathan to show him *hesed*. Jonathan implores David, I Sam. 20:14, 15 (S<sup>b</sup>), to practice forever toward him and his house the *hesed* which had been sworn to him in the name of Yahweh. In II Sam. 9:1, 3, 7 (Je) David shows *hesed* to Jonathan's son.<sup>5</sup>

## D. BETWEEN FRIENDS

Absalom, II Sam. 16:17 (Je), asks Hushai whether, in his relationship to David, Hushai had shown his friend *hesed*. David wishes to reciprocate to Hanun, the son of his friend Nahash, II Sam. 10:2 (Je),<sup>6</sup> the same *hesed* that Nahash had evinced toward him.

## E. BETWEEN RULER AND SUBJECT

Abner, II Sam. 3:8 (S<sup>a</sup>), speaks of the *hesed* he had shown to King Saul and his son Eshbaal. In II Chron. 24:22 we read that King Joash, unmindful of the *hesed* shown to him by his High Priest Jehoiada, caused the latter's son to be slain. Because the officers of Benhadad, defeated by Ahab, I Kings 20:31 f.,<sup>7</sup> know of the reputation of the kings of Israel as being מלכי הסדר, they approach Ahab with the request to spare their king, whom they call Ahab's servant.

<sup>5</sup> We may assume that the historian in Je knew of the ברית יהוה between David and Jonathan, cf. Ch. I, pp. 48 ff.

<sup>6</sup> I Chron. 19:2.

<sup>7</sup> Staerk, *Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments*. (Berlin and Leipzig, 1918), p. 166, assigns I Kings 20 to the end of the 9th century. Cf. Steuernagel, pp. 362, 3; Kamphausen in Kautzsch's Bible<sup>3</sup>, et al.

Esther 2:9, 17 speaks of the *hesed* which Esther had obtained from King Ahasuerus.

## F. HESED AS MERITED OBLIGATION

In Judg. 1:24 (J) we read that the spies scouting Bethel promise to show *hesed* to a man whom they saw leaving the city if he would indicate to them a way of entering the city. David commands Solomon to show *hesed* forever to the members of the house of Barzillai, I Kings 2:7 (Je), because the latter had given him aid when he fled from Absalom.<sup>8</sup> David, II Sam. 2:5 (S<sup>a</sup>), blesses the men of Jabesh-gilead for having shown *hesed* to Saul, their deliverer. Judg. 8:35 (Rd) relates that the people of Israel did not show *hesed* to Gideon's family, although Gideon had been a great benefactor to the people of Israel. Joseph implores the chief butler, whose dream he had interpreted propitiously, Gen. 40:14 (E<sup>2</sup>), to remember him and show him *hesed* after his reinstatement to rank and office.

## Summary

From the preceding analysis it becomes clear that *hesed* is received or shown only by those among whom a definite relationship exists. Accordingly, what we call the *hesed*-relationship exists between:

- A. Relatives by blood or marriage, related clans and related tribes
- B. Host and guest
- C. Allies and their relatives
- D. Friends
- E. Ruler and subject
- F. Those who have gained merit by rendering aid, and the parties thereby put under obligation.

The above indicates that *hesed* exists between people who are in some close relationship to one another. Our next concern is to explain what *hesed* is. We must now deal with the extent to which the meaning of the word is influenced by the fact that *hesed* can be practiced only between persons who share an ethically binding relationship. The analysis of the conceptual content of the word *hesed* will be based on a further examination of those passages in which the word occurs in a purely secular sense.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. II Sam. 17:27-29; 19:32-41.



## II. HESED AS CONDUCT CORRESPONDING TO A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP OF RIGHTS AND DUTIES

### A. HESED AS THE MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP OF RIGHTS AND DUTIES BETWEEN THE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY OR TRIBE

In ancient Israel, as well as in ancient Arabia,<sup>9</sup> a mutual relationship of rights and duties existed among the members of a family or among those who believed themselves to be of similar tribal ancestry. The family and tribal bonds were of primary importance.<sup>10</sup> The members of a family or a clan were totally dependent upon one another. They lived in a relatively closed circle, the confines of which could be widened only by the undertaking of relationships based on rights and duties assumed on a different basis. We shall treat this point later in greater detail. Such members enjoyed common rights and they had to fulfill mutual obligations. Their whole existence was governed by this concept of reciprocity. In reference to I Sam. 20:8, W. R. Smith<sup>11</sup> says:

In primitive society, where every stranger is an enemy, the whole conception of the duties of humanity is framed within the narrow circle of the family or the tribe; relations of love are either identical with those of kinship or are conceived as resting on a covenant.

In ancient Israel it appears that conduct based on relationships involving rights and duties of a family or a tribal community was called *hesed*. We have noted<sup>12</sup> that only those who stood in a relationship of rights and duties to one another received and practiced *hesed*.

<sup>9</sup> The same is true of present-day Arabia as well. Cf. W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge, 1885), pp. 22-26, 35, 56, 57, 160, 161. Pedersen, *Der Eid bei den Semiten* (Strassburg, 1914), pp. 21-23, 28, 31, 222.

<sup>10</sup> Benzinger, *Hebräische Archäologie* (Tübingen, 1907), pp. 102 f. "In no nation is the significance of the family as the foundation of the entire social order as clearly recognizable as in Israel. . . . We get to know the Israelites still on the lowest level of political organization, at the time of clans or tribal organization, in which the family is of the utmost importance."

Cf. Nowack, *Lehrbuch der Hebräischen Archäologie* (Freiburg i.B. und Leipzig, 1894), p. 152, et al.

<sup>11</sup> *The Prophets of Israel* (Edinburgh, 1882), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Supra*, p. 37.

This is borne out by the interpretation of *hesed* as mutuality or reciprocal conduct (*gemeinschaftgemässen Verhaltungsweise*).

### I. KINSHIP

#### a. *Consanguinity: Father and Son*

Jacob, near death, called his son, Joseph, to ask a great favor of him, Gen. 47:29. He said, "If I have found favor<sup>13</sup> in your sight, put your hand under my thigh,<sup>14</sup> that you will show me *חסד ואמת*; and not bury me in Egypt." Jacob adjured Joseph to show him faithful love even after his death, and to bury him with his fathers in Canaan. Great importance was attached to burial.<sup>15</sup> He saw, however, the great difficulties connected with the fulfillment of his heart's desire and knew that in the natural course of events he would be buried in Egypt. For this reason he found it necessary to make his son take an oath. Joseph took this oath, and when the time came he fulfilled it.<sup>16</sup> Actually, no special oath should have been necessary. Had Joseph not shown faithful love to his father before his death, he would have been an unnatural son. Every son owed his father love commensurate with the demands of loyalty. Such love was based not only on personal affection but also on duty. It was the only possible conduct of a son toward his father, since they are both of the same flesh and blood.

#### b. *Relationship by Marriage*

##### (1) *Husband and wife*

When Abraham travelled to strange lands with his wife, Sarah, Gen. 20:13, he asked her during the course of their journey to pass him off as her brother, since he was afraid of being murdered because of his attractive wife. Before asking that favor of her, he reminded her of her duties toward him, saying, "This is your *hesed*, which you must show me: wherever we go, say that I am your brother."

<sup>13</sup> *חן בעיניך* means here "If you really care for me" and is actually a term of entreaty and cannot be explained by reference to Joseph's exalted position, as Procksch says in *Die Genesis*<sup>2</sup> (Leipzig, 1924). It merely emphasizes the close relationship between father and son. He who has found *חן* in the eyes of another may also be shown *hesed*. Cf. Gen. 19:19.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. 24:2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Gen. 23; 50:1-11; II Sam. 2:5.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 50:1-11.



There were certain fixed rules of conduct for members of a family based on reciprocity, called *hesed*, which obligated all members of a family to assist one another. *Hesed* characterized the relationship between husband and wife, and both had to comport themselves accordingly. *Hesed* was not merely love dependent solely on the subject but was, at the same time, loyalty and duty. Where *hesed* is used alone and not in the combination *חסד ואמת*, as is frequently the case, one may still picture mentally *אמת* next to *חסד*. Abraham, who believed his life to be in danger, could plead with Sarah to remember her *hesed* obligation to him and to save him by stating that she was his sister (which, in fact, she was).<sup>17</sup> By doing so, however, she risked the danger of having strangers expropriate her.

(2) *The redeemer and the widow of his kinsman*

Only in the Book of Ruth is the word *hesed* used in a sense similar to that employed in the older sources. In Ruth 3:10 it is clearly shown that *hesed* is that mode of conduct which is in accordance with familial obligations. Ruth obeyed her mother-in-law and hid herself close to where Boaz slept. After he had fallen asleep, she nestled at his feet. Boaz awakened at midnight and was startled to find her there. Upon his questioning, Ruth told him who she was and asked him, as a kinsman of her husband, to fulfill his obligation to her as redeemer (*גאל*) and to marry her. Boaz declared his willingness to do so, provided that a nearer kinsman of her husband would renounce his duties and rights. He blessed Ruth, who had so loyally shown *hesed* to her husband, saying, "May you be blessed by Yahweh, my daughter; you have made this last *hesed* greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich." The *hesed* which Ruth had demonstrated to her husband even after his death, by leaving her native land and father's house and following Naomi,<sup>18</sup> was surpassed by the sense of love and loyalty she subsequently demonstrated. Instead of marrying a younger man, Ruth preferred to turn to the older Boaz, her husband's kinsman, in order, by virtue of this marriage, to have offspring for her husband who had died childless. Here *hesed* indicates a development beyond the ordinary use of the term in the older sources, since *hesed* in this context refers more to a subjective mode of conduct willed by an individual, and not simply

<sup>17</sup> Vs. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Nowack, *Richter, Ruth and Bücher Samuelis* (Göttingen, 1902); Bertheau, *Das Buch der Richter und Ruth* (Leipzig, 1883).

to an attitude of obligation. Ruth was by no means obliged to go with Naomi. She was as free as Naomi's other daughter-in-law to return to her own people. Yet, in faithful love she followed her mother-in-law. In true religiosity she complied with Jewish custom. Ruth took it upon herself to practice *hesed* in order to fulfill the obligations of a Jewish widow.

The meaning of *hesed* as conduct in accord with familial obligations is confirmed also in Ruth 2:20, if we understand *אשר לאיעוב* as *אשר לאיעוב חסדו אתהחיים ואתהמתים* to refer to Boaz and not to Yahweh. In II Sam. 2:5 we have almost an exact parallel to Ruth 2:20. David blessed the men of Jabesh-gilead because they had buried Saul, saying: *ברוכים אתם ליהוה אשר עשיתם החסד הזה*. Boaz is blessed by Naomi, Ruth 2:20, for the kindness he had shown Ruth. She says:

ברוך הוא<sup>19</sup> ליהוה אשר לאיעוב חסדו אתהחיים ואתהמתים.

If we accept the commonly held view according to which *אשר לאיעוב* is in apposition to *ליהוה*, this would be the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the *hesed* of God is mentioned in reference to the dead. The relationship between God and man, very frequently expressed by *hesed*, requires of man the fulfillment of certain conditions. Only those who serve God in faithfulness participate in communion with him and receive *hesed*<sup>20</sup> from him. It is very doubtful whether the dead, who in the Hebrew Bible generally are described as having absolutely no relationship with God,<sup>21</sup> can appear here as receiving *hesed* from God. The passage beginning with *אשר לאיעוב* is to be understood as referring to Boaz. It was he who had shown *hesed* to the living and the dead.<sup>22</sup> From his servants, Boaz discovered who Ruth was<sup>23</sup> and then had shown her special kindness. Further, Boaz was in no way perplexed when Ruth asked him to fulfill his obligation as "redeemer" and to marry her. She gave him no other explanation than that he was the "redeemer." Boaz was aware of his relationship to Ruth and also knew who was still a closer kinsman to her than

<sup>19</sup> S reads *יהוה* for *ליהוה*, cf. Kittel, *Biblia Hebraica*. This is not necessary since the above suggested meaning concludes the same.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Deut. 5:10; Exod. 20:6; Deut. 7:9; II Chron. 6:14; I Kings 8:23; Dan. 9:24; Neh. 1:5; Ps. 103:17, 18; 37:28; 96:10; 86:2; I Sam. 2:9; Ps. 147:11; 119:124; 143:12; *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Isaiah 38:18; Ps. 6:6; 16:10; 88:12.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth 1:8 also mentions conduct toward the living and the dead. Naomi blessed her daughters-in-law, saying: "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me."

<sup>23</sup> Ruth 2:6, 11.



he. Boaz thereupon declared, without hesitation, his readiness to marry her if the other kinsman would forego his claim.<sup>24</sup> His conduct toward Ruth, therefore, was in accordance with *hesed*. That evening, when Ruth told her mother-in-law that she had met Boaz and told her of his friendliness toward her, Naomi acknowledged him as a relative. In his conduct toward Ruth, she recognized the attitude of a relative conscious of familial obligations. By his kindness to Ruth, Boaz had honored his deceased kinsman and fulfilled his obligations, and for that Naomi blessed him.

## 2. THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY

### a. *The Tribal Community in its More Limited Sense: Related Families*

In returning to the older sources, such as Gen. 24:49, we find that *hesed* means to be in accord with family obligations. Abraham's servant wanted to bring Rebecca to Abraham out of the house of Nahor, Abraham's brother,<sup>25</sup> so that she might become Isaac's wife. He asked the members of her family if they were ready to show his master steadfast love, i. e., to act in accordance with their obligations as relatives of Abraham. The proof of this would be their consent to the marriage.

### b. *The Tribal Community in a Broader Sense: Related Tribes*

*Hesed*, as a mode of conduct between related and friendly tribes, occurs in I Sam. 15:6. The Kenites, Israel's neighbors and close friends who were related to the Israelites through Moses' marriage,<sup>26</sup> had shown *hesed* to the Israelites in their Exodus from Egypt.<sup>27</sup> They had maintained that relationship toward Israel which ought to exist between relatives and friends. The Kenites, who had conducted themselves as friends<sup>28</sup> and relatives of Israel in time of need by performing *hesed* and fulfilling their mutually obligatory duties in friendly kinship, rendered loyal assistance to Israel. This *hesed* was later reciprocated. Saul spared them in his campaign against the

<sup>24</sup> Ruth 3:9 f.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *supra*, fn. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Judges 1:16; 4:11. Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Stuttgart, 1923), Vol. 1, pp. 318, 347 bottom; Vol. 2, p. 17; Stade, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Berlin, 1887), I.1, pp. 131 f.; Budde, *Die Religion des Volkes Israel bis zur Verbannung* (Giessen, 1900), pp. 15 f.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Kittel, *loc. cit.*; Stade, *loc. cit.*; cf. *supra*, fn. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ch. I, pp. 49 f.

Amalekites, in whose midst they lived. The Israelites were obligated to behave toward the Kenites as the latter had conducted themselves toward the Israelites.

## B. HESED AS THE MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP OF RIGHTS AND DUTIES BETWEEN HOST AND GUEST

In ancient Israel, as was the case in ancient Arabia (and also in present-day Arabia),<sup>29</sup> the law of hospitality was sacred. The host, if necessary, had to risk his life for his guest.<sup>30</sup> Host and guest stood in a reciprocal protective relationship to one another. Between them there was a relationship of rights and duties<sup>31</sup> comparable to that which existed between blood relatives. Host and guest became "brothers"<sup>32</sup> in every respect. Whoever slept in the tent of another and ate of his bread was accounted as a member of the host's family.<sup>33</sup> In ancient Israel, this mutual relationship of rights and duties between host and guest was called *hesed*.

### I. HOST AND GUEST

From Gen. 19:19 we can see how important the law of hospitality and its duties were to the ancient Israelites. Lot received in his house the three strangers (angels) who had appeared in Sodom. When the men of the city demanded that the strangers be handed over, Lot offered to bring out his chaste daughters in their place to be dealt with as they pleased. He would not, however, surrender his guests under any circumstances. He had taken them in and it was a sacred duty for him, as host, to protect them. Lot told the men of the city,<sup>34</sup> "But these men you may not harm, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." Angered by his refusal, they attacked Lot. He would have fared badly if his guests had not pulled him into the house and barred the door, while they afflicted the people in front with blindness. Thereupon, the strangers announced to Lot the

<sup>29</sup> W. R. Smith, *Kinship*, pp. 14, 41; Doughty, *Wanderings in Arabia* (London, 1908), Vol. I, p. 252; Vol. II, pp. 154, 164, 276, 277, 280.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 41. "It is a principle alike in old and new Arabia that the guest is inviolable." Cf. Gen. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Pedersen, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 14. "A man whom one is bound to protect is . . . a brother by virtue of this bond."

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *supra*, fns. 29, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Vs. 8.