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Dan Belnap
dan_belnap@byu.edu

Daniel L. Belnap
Brigham Young University - Provo

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“How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness”: The Gospel Principle of *Hesed*

DANIEL L. BELNAP

The concept of *hesed* (pronounced *khesed*)¹ is unfamiliar to most Bible readers. This is partly due to the fact that it is a Hebrew word found in the Old Testament; thus, we will never come across the word *hesed* anywhere in our King James Version (KJV). Moreover, the term is difficult to translate, the KJV providing no less than fifteen different terms to signify the presence of *hesed* in the text, the most common being mercy, kindness, and loving-kindness.² Yet the principle of *hesed* may be one of the most important doctrinal concepts in the Old Testament, as it appears 245 times in the Hebrew Bible and embodies both the manner in which Israel was expected to act and the true nature of God. Thus, by studying the *hesed* references within their contexts and discerning the pattern in which this gospel principle is revealed, we can recognize its importance, particularly through its emphasis on acts of deliverance in the Old Testament narratives and its insight on what it means to be like God in our own personal journeys toward salvation.³

Before we get into the references, we need to note some basics. To begin, *hesed* is a noun. Moreover, *hesed* is often the object of the sentence, not the subject; thus, the verb that precedes *hesed* is an important indicator as to what *hesed* is. While not every *hesed* reference is found in a verb-object

relationship, of those that are, the vast majority follow the verb *asah*, translated in the KJV as “shew(-eth, -ed, etc.).” The term is the common Hebrew verb, however, meaning “to do, to make, to perform”; thus, when translating it with *hesed* as the object, it is more correct to say that one “does” *hesed*.⁴ Also important is the predominance of God as the one who does *hesed*. Of the 245 references, two-thirds of them either describe God as one who does *hesed* or are praises to God because he does *hesed*. Of the remaining third, about half of those also mention *hesed* in connection with God. Thus *hesed* is clearly associated with the divine and may even be used to define godly experience. Yet, though it is a predominantly divine action, *hesed* can be done by mortals, and this suggests that *hesed* is a characteristic common to both the nature of man and his relationship to the nature of God. Of course, these details still have not told us exactly what *hesed* is. Thus we need to look at some of the references.

MAN AS DOER OF *HESED*

The first reference to *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible is in the words of Lot to the angels who had come to warn him of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. After they told him to leave and travel some distance, Lot responded by asking if he could travel to a nearby town: “Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast performed great *hesed* (magnified thy mercy), which thou hast done (shewed) unto me in saving my life. . . . Behold, now, this city is near to flee unto” (Genesis 19:19–20; this and subsequent passages are author’s translation, with original KJV in parentheses).⁵ As the verse shows, Lot began his request by recognizing that God, or God’s messenger in this case, had already done *hesed* by warning Lot of the impending destruction. Thus, Lot was asking for another act of *hesed*, as implied by virtue of his mentioning that God had already performed *hesed* on his behalf.

Like his nephew, Abraham was acquainted with *hesed*, both as a giver and a receiver. In Genesis 20, Abraham asked Sarah to show him *hesed* by saying that she was his sister when they met potentially life-threatening individuals: “I said unto her, This is thy *hesed* (kindness) which thou shalt do for me (shew unto me); at every place whither we shall come, say of me,

He is my brother” (Genesis 20:13). Later, in Genesis 21, Abimelech, one of Abraham’s neighbors and rivals, wishing to avoid future confrontations, entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham that included the following oath: “Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son’s son: but according to the *hesed* (kindness) that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned” (verse 23).

A few chapters later in Genesis 24, Abraham’s servant recognized the role of *hesed* in the eventual success of his journey to find Isaac a wife. In verse 12 the servant prayed that God would “do *hesed* (shew kindness) unto my master Abraham” by granting him quick success. In verse 14 he specified the sign by which he would know that *hesed* had been enacted: if the woman at the well would offer both him and his camels water, “thereby shall I know that thou hast done *hesed* (shewed kindness) unto my master.” Rebekah did this, whereupon the servant then declared, “Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his *hesed* (mercy) and his truth” (verse 27).

Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph is also associated with *hesed*. In Genesis 39:21, following Joseph’s confrontation with Potiphar’s wife, which ended with his imprisonment, the narrator tells us that “the Lord was with Joseph, and performed for him *hesed* (shewed him mercy), and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison,” thus ensuring that his prison stay was a relatively pleasant one. In the next chapter, Joseph was ultimately released from prison by an act of *hesed*. After explaining to the pharaoh’s chief butler the meaning of his dream, Joseph requested, “Think on me when it shall be well with thee, and do *hesed* (shew kindness), I pray thee, unto me” (Genesis 40:14). Unfortunately, the cupbearer forgot Joseph upon his release, but when the pharaoh had his dream of the seven fat cattle and the seven lean cattle, his servant remembered Joseph, and Joseph was released. Finally, near the end of his life, Joseph’s father, Jacob, called Joseph to his side and asked his son for an act of *hesed*: “If now I have found grace in thy sight, put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh, and perform *hesed* (deal kindly) and truly with me; bury me not, I pray thee, in Egypt” (Genesis 47:29). Thus, in the narratives of all four patriarchs, *hesed* played fundamental roles in their ability to fulfill their divine purposes.

In the case of Abraham and Abimelech, the principle of *hesed* was one of the primary means by which Israel interacted with their neighbors upon entering the promised land. Early in the book of Joshua, the subject of the exchange between Rahab, the woman of Jericho, and the spies of Israel was one of *hesed*: “Swear unto me by the Lord, since I have done you *hesed* (shewed you kindness), that ye will also do *hesed* (shew kindness) unto my father’s house” (Joshua 2:12). The specific act she requested is that they deliver her and her family from the destruction of Jericho. The spies responded, “Our life for yours. . . . And it shall be, when the Lord hath given us the land, that we will deal *hesed* and truth (kindly and truly) with thee” (verse 14). In this scene her promise to help them was recognized as an act of *hesed*, and their agreeing to help her was their act of *hesed*. This same reciprocal scenario was played out later in Judges 1 when the tribe of Joseph took over Bethel. In Judges 1:24 the spies of the tribe saw a man leave the city and approached him: “Shew us, we pray thee, the entrance into the city and we will perform thee *hesed* (shew thee mercy).” Like Rahab and her family, the act of *hesed* done for the man was his survival: “And when he shewed them the entrance into the city, they smote the city with the edge of the sword; but they let go the man and all his family” (verse 25).

Following the establishment of Israel in the promised land, the enacting of *hesed* was recognized as a kingly trait. Saul did *hesed* early in his reign when before destroying the Amalekites he allowed the Kenites to flee: “Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them: for ye performed *hesed* (shewed kindness) to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt” (1 Samuel 15:6). In chapter 20, Saul’s son, Jonathan, who was a close friend of David’s, was approached by David to ask for an act of *hesed* on his behalf—to cover for David’s absence from the new moon feast: “Therefore thou shalt perform *hesed* (deal kindly) with thy servant” (verse 8). Jonathan agreed, but asked in return for a future act of *hesed* from David, that when David became king he would not destroy Jonathan’s line: “And thou shalt not only while yet I live do me *hesed* (shew me the kindness) of the Lord, that I die not: But also thou shalt not cut off thy *hesed* (kindness) from my house for ever” (verses 14–15).

These promises of complementary acts of *hesed* were fulfilled later. After David had established his throne, 2 Samuel 9:1, 7 mention David’s desire to remember his promise of *hesed*: “Is there yet any that is left of the house

of Saul, that I may enact *hesed* (shew him kindness) for Jonathan’s sake?” (verse 1). This act was realized as he took Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s son, and brought him to his palace with this declaration: “Fear not: for I will surely do thee *hesed* (shew thee kindness) for Jonathan thy father’s sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually” (verse 7).

Like Saul, David also used *hesed* in his political relationships. In 2 Samuel 2:5–6, while establishing his throne, David praised the men of Jabesh-gilead, supporters of Saul, for their act of *hesed*: “Blessed be ye of the Lord, that ye have performed this *hesed* (shewed this kindness) unto your lord, even unto Saul, and have buried him. And now the Lord acts in *hesed* and truth (shew kindness and truth) unto you . . . because ye have done this thing.” In 2 Samuel 10:2, David, upon hearing of the death of Nahash, his Ammonite contemporary, wished to offer condolences and congratulations to Hanun, Nahash’s son: “I will perform *hesed* (shew kindness) unto Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father performed *hesed* (shewed kindness) unto me. And David sent to comfort him by the hand of his servants for his father.” Finally, David also left instructions to his son concerning acts of *hesed* after his death. In 1 Kings 2:7, David instructed Solomon to “do *hesed* (shew kindness) unto the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and let them be of those that eat at thy table: for so they came to me when I fled because of Absalom thy brother.”

At least three other kings of Israel are associated with *hesed*: “Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his *hesed* (goodness), behold they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, and in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel” (2 Chronicles 32:32); “Now the rest of the acts of Josiah, and his *hesed* (goodness), according to that which was written in the law of the Lord, and his deeds, first and last, behold, they are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah” (2 Chronicles 35:26–27); the third kingly reference is associated with Ahab and will be discussed in detail later.

No discussion of *hesed* would be complete without mentioning its role in the interactions of Naomi, her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, and the redeemer Boaz.⁶ Mentioned three times in the book of Ruth, the term is used to describe the acts of Ruth and God explicitly and the works of Boaz implicitly. The first reference is in chapter 1, verse 8, as Naomi gives the

following blessing upon both of her daughters-in-law in response to their desire to return her safely to her homeland: “Go, return each to her mother’s house: the Lord deal *hesed* (kindly) with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.” This blessing was given in response to their accompanying Naomi home to protect her on the journey.⁷

Later Naomi noted God’s *hesed*, this time referring to the manner in which Boaz had provided sustenance for both Naomi and Ruth: “Blessed be he of the Lord, who hath not left off his *hesed* (kindness) to the living and to the dead” (Ruth 2:20). In this case, while Boaz may have performed the act of *hesed*, the honor of it was given to God, as it was he who was truly aware of Naomi’s condition. Finally, when Ruth helped Boaz to accept his role as redeemer in the family, he responded with a blessing upon her: “Blessed be thou of the Lord, my daughter: for thou hast done more *hesed* (shewed more kindness) in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich” (Ruth 3:10). In other words, her final act of *hesed* led to her choosing Boaz as the family’s redeemer, demonstrating her awareness of his true worth, based not on appearances or simple physical attractiveness, which is temporary, but on more firm principles of leadership and authority. These acts of *hesed* only underscore the importance of the book of Ruth, for the acts of *hesed* ultimately lead to the birth of David, the chosen of God, which was likely the act of *hesed* requested by Naomi in Ruth 1.⁸

Already we can begin to see a pattern of the nature of *hesed*. So far, all of these acts of *hesed* have been associated with deliverance from either an actual or perceived loss of life, which includes threats against the family’s futurity. Thus, Abimelech and Abraham’s servant, while not necessarily threatened physically, recognized that *hesed* was necessary for the continuation of the family lineage. Similarly, Jonathan requested an act of *hesed* to preserve his line, and David asked for an act of *hesed* to save his life. The book of Ruth is all about the continuation of Naomi’s family.

In most, if not in all, of these cases, a mutuality in enacting *hesed* is assumed in the relationship. Abimelech expected *hesed* because he himself had done *hesed*. David wished *hesed* on the men of Jabesh-gilead because they did *hesed* earlier. The same goes for Rahab, the man of Bethel, and the Kenites; in each case they were granted *hesed* because they themselves had done *hesed*. Importantly, all the acts of *hesed*, while requested, were not

required or forced. They were freely offered or provided; thus, *hesed* is an act of agency. But the obligatory nature of *hesed* reveals one more element—that it is an act that comes from an awareness of another. One cannot unconsciously do *hesed*. As we shall see, every one of these elements is reflected in those passages concerned with the primary performer of *hesed*—God.

GOD AS DOER OF *HESED*

It was mentioned that two-thirds of all the references to *hesed* speak of *hesed* that God has done, the general recognition that God continues to do *hesed*, or the hope that God will perform *hesed* in the future. We have already seen God's *hesed* in the above references. The words of Lot and Abraham's servant both recognize the *hesed* of God in the events in which they were involved. Naomi requested that God do *hesed* on Ruth's behalf, and David asked that God provide *hesed* to his friends and associates. Other references specify different acts of *hesed* that God has performed. Not surprisingly, these other references also note the act of God's *hesed* as one of deliverance from harm, the most famous being God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

As early as the Song of Moses, recorded in Exodus 15:13, we find God's *hesed* described as an act of redemption: “Thou in thy *hesed* (mercy) hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation.” Later, while in the wilderness, Moses relied on God's *hesed* to save the people from themselves after they had provoked the Lord, eliciting his declaration that he would destroy them and raise another, more righteous Israel. Responding to this, Moses intervened by relying on God's history of *hesed* acts: “Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of thy *hesed* (mercy), and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now” (Numbers 14:19). In Psalm 106:7 we are told that Israel did not remember God's acts of *hesed* in Egypt, nor in the wilderness, again demonstrating that ancient Israel understood that their deliverance from Egypt was the quintessential act of *hesed*.

God's *hesed* as an act of deliverance is also attested to in a more general manner. In Psalm 143:12 the Psalmist prayed, “By thy *hesed* (Of thy mercy) cut off mine enemies, and destroy all them that afflict my soul.” In

one of the communal lament psalms, the Psalmist cried out, “Arise for our help, and redeem us for the sake of thy *hesed* (for thy mercies’ sake)” (Psalm 44:26). In 31:7–8 the Psalmist declared, “I will be glad and rejoice in thy *hesed* (mercy): for thou hast considered my trouble . . . and hast not shut me up into the hand of the enemy.” Psalm 85:7 reads, “Perform for us thy *hesed* (Shew us thy mercy), O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.” Similarly, Psalm 109:26 includes the plea “Help me, O Lord my God: O save me according to thy *hesed* (mercy).” Finally, at least one psalm rejoices in the protecting power of God’s *hesed* that he has already performed: “But I will sing of thy power; yea, I will sing aloud of thy *hesed* (mercy) in the morning: for thou hast been my defence and refuge in the day of my trouble” (Psalm 59:16).⁹

The Old Testament also describes God’s spiritual deliverance of the individual as an act of *hesed*. We have already seen in Numbers 14 that Moses recognized God’s *hesed* as the means by which he forgave Israel. Similarly, in Psalm 86:13 we read, “For great is thy *hesed* (mercy) toward me: and thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.” Though the term *hell* brings up certain images, the Hebrew term is *sheol*, the most common Hebrew term for the abode of the dead. Thus the Psalmist recognizes his deliverance from the spirit world as God’s *hesed*. Elsewhere God’s *hesed* is recognized in forgiving sin. In Psalm 51:1 we read, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy *hesed* (lovingkindness): according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions,” and in Proverbs 16:6 the connection between forgiveness and divine *hesed* are explicitly tied together: “By *hesed* (mercy) and truth iniquity is purged.” In light of these references, divine *hesed* is always an act of deliverance, but is of greater magnitude when it delivers man from death and hell, and as such reflects the understanding of the Atonement as described in latter-day scripture and revelation.

Divine *hesed* also incorporates the reciprocation found in the mortal experiences of *hesed*. Yet, although mortal to mortal *hesed* acts lead to the deliverance of one mortal to another, one cannot respond in kind to God’s acts of *hesed*; in other words, man cannot deliver God. Instead, the expected mutuality arising from divine *hesed* is manifested in one’s obedience to God’s word. In the Decalogue, we are told to “not bow down [before idols], . . . for I the Lord thy God . . . enacting *hesed* (shewing mercy) unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments”¹⁰ (Exodus 20:5–6). In Deuteronomy 7:12–13 Moses promised Israel, “If ye hearken to these

judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the *hesed* (mercy) which he sware unto thy fathers: And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee.”

The same relationship between obedience and *hesed* exists in texts outside the Pentateuch. In Psalm 103:11 we are told, “Great is his *hesed* (mercy) toward them that fear him.” Psalm 25:10 tells us, “All the paths of the Lord are *hesed* (mercy) and truth unto such as keep his covenant.” Psalm 36:10 records, “O continue thy *hesed* (lovingkindness) unto them that know thee.” The same principle is taught in Proverbs 14:22: “*Hesed* (mercy) and truth shall be to them that devise good.”

At least three references suggest that this obedience is ultimately demonstrated by performing *hesed* on others. In Micah 6:8 we read his rhetorical question: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love *hesed* (mercy), and to walk humbly with thy God?” Similarly, in Zechariah the righteous are exhorted, “Execute true judgment, and perform *hesed* (shew mercy), and compassions every man to his brother” (Zechariah 7:9). Moreover, as we obey the Lord, not only can we expect an act of divine *hesed* in return, but more importantly, we will comprehend the nature of *hesed*: “Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the *hesed* (lovingkindness) of the Lord” (Psalm 107:43).¹¹ Finally, as we shall see, *hesed* includes the intent and not just rote action, as Hosea explains, “For I desired *hesed* (mercy), and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (6:6).¹² In other words, the intent, the mental state one is in, is as much a characteristic of *hesed* as the act itself.

HESED AND THE MENTAL STATE

This last observation can be understood best by recognizing the relationship between the concept of *hesed* and the concept of truth. In Exodus 34:6 we are told that God is “abundant in *hesed* (goodness) and truth.”¹³ In Psalm 61:7 the plea is that God “prepare *hesed* (mercy) and truth,” and Psalm 85:10 rejoices that in God “*hesed* (mercy) and truth are met together.” Though we often use the word *truth* to describe the validity or the veracity of a concept or the words of another (“That principle is true,” “What he said

is true,” and so forth), the word originally referred to the concepts of trust, fidelity, constancy, and steadfastness.¹⁴ In other words, truth is concerned with the reliability of an object or person. It is this reliability, or constancy, that gives concepts validity.¹⁵ The reliability of a given thing allows for the exercise of power, since knowing of its truthfulness allows us to act upon it. Thus, the reception of truth gives us power to act in ways previously thought impossible.

When tied with *hesed*, truth highlights the eternal nature of God’s *hesed* and describes an aspect of God’s *hesed*, which is that he also gives us the power to change ourselves as well as delivering us out of situations that we cannot control. In Psalm 57:3, following a plea that God save the individual, it reads, “God shall send forth his *hesed* (mercy) and his truth,” suggesting that the manner in which the individual will be delivered is through not only the reception of revelatory truths, giving one power to act, but also a specific act of deliverance by God.

In light of the association of truth with *hesed*, it is not surprising to find other references acknowledging the relationship of trust to *hesed*. Psalm 13:5 declares, “I have trusted in thy *hesed* (mercy),” and Psalm 52:8 makes the same claim, “I trust in the *hesed* (mercy) of God for ever and ever,” while Psalm 32:10 suggests that “he that trusteth in the Lord, *hesed* (mercy) shall compass him [about].” Psalm 36:7 relates, “How excellent is thy *hesed* (lovingkindness), O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.” Finally, in Psalm 89:14, the phrase “*hesed* (mercy) and truth shall go before thy face” tells us that these two concepts defined the work of God for ancient Israel.¹⁶

The association of *hesed* with truth suggests that *hesed* is more than merely an act; it includes the mental activity that governs such acts. In 2 Chronicles 6:42, Solomon ends his temple dedicatory prayer by requesting that God “remember the *hesed* (mercies) of David thy servant.” Elsewhere, in Nehemiah 13:22, Nehemiah asks that God “remember me . . . and spare me according to the greatness of thy *hesed* (mercy).” In Psalm 25, verses 6 and 7 ask God to remember his *hesed* and thereby his relationship to Israel: “Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy *hesed* acts (loving-kindnesses), . . . Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy *hesed* (mercy) remember thou me for thy goodness’ sake.” This last line is especially intriguing because it suggests that God may

actually be performing *hesed* by “remembering” or remaining aware of the individual.

Psalm 98:3 suggests that God’s care of Israel throughout the ages is because “he hath remembered his *hesed* (mercy) and his truth toward the house of Israel: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” Finally, at least one reference suggests that God remembering his *hesed* may happen because Israel has performed earlier *hesed* acts toward others: “Remember me, O my God . . . and wipe not out my good *hesed* acts (deeds) that I have done for the house of my God” (Nehemiah 13:14). In other words, if God’s remembering is an act of *hesed*, it is done in recognition of the *hesed* acts performed by the righteous.

The relationship between remembering and *hesed* may explain why *hesed* is so often associated with an answer to prayer. For instance, in Psalm 66:20 the answer to prayer is equated to an act of *hesed*: “Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his *hesed* (mercy) from me.” Similarly, in Psalm 17:6–7 the Psalmist cries: “incline thine ear unto me, and hear my speech. Perform (shew) thy marvelous *hesed* (lovingkindness), O thou that savest by thy right hand them which put their trust in thee.” Psalm 69:13 says, “My prayer is unto thee, O Lord, in an acceptable time: O God, in thy abundant *hesed* (the multitude of thy mercy) hear me.” In Psalm 86:5 the same theme is present: “For thou, Lord, art good . . . and plenteous in *hesed* (mercy) unto all them that call upon thee,” and in Psalm 143:8 the individual prays for the means to receive God’s *hesed*: “Cause me to hear thy *hesed* (lovingkindness) in the morning.”¹⁷

Yet just as God is asked to remember his *hesed* acts on Israel’s behalf, so Israel is expected to remember them as well to receive continued *hesed*: “I have not concealed thy *hesed* (lovingkindness) and thy truth from the great congregation. Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord; let thy *hesed* (lovingkindness) and thy truth continually preserve me. For innumerable evils have compassed me about” (Psalm 40:10–12). Moreover, there are references which detail what happened to Israel when one did not do *hesed*. In Judges 8 the horrible spiritual state of Israel is summed up in the last two verses of the chapter: “And the children of Israel remembered not the Lord their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies, . . . neither did they return *hesed* acts (shewed they kindness) to the house of Jerubbaal . . . in return for [according to] all the goodness

which he had done (shewed) unto Israel” (Judges 8:34–35). The result was internal fighting among the sons of Gideon and the eventual defeat of Israel by the Shechemites. Psalm 106:7 suggests that Israel’s continued provoking of the Lord during the exodus and their subsequent sinful state came about because “they remembered not the abundant *hesed* of God (multitude of thy mercies).”¹⁸ The mutuality of *hesed* also meant that a lack of doing *hesed* acts resulted in a lack of receiving *hesed* acts. Psalm 109 describes just such a state: “Let there be none to extend *hesed* (mercy) to him. . . . Let his posterity be cut off . . . because that he remembered not to perform *hesed* (show mercy) . . . but persecuted the poor and needy” (verses 12, 13, 16).¹⁹ In other words, because the individual did not remember to do *hesed*, *hesed* should not be extended to him.

Finally, according to 1 Kings 20:31–43, not remembering God’s word can negate what would potentially be an act of *hesed*. In the text, Ahab, king of Israel, defeated the Syrian king Ben-Hadad, whereupon Ben-Hadad’s servants suggested that he plead for mercy from Ahab because “we have heard the kings of the house of Israel are kings of *hesed* (merciful kings): let us, I pray thee . . . go out to the king of Israel: peradventure he will save thy life” (verse 31). Ben-Hadad did so, and Ahab promptly proclaimed him as a brother entering into a covenant relationship with him. At this point, it would appear that Ahab did *hesed* by delivering the Syrian king from death, similar to other *hesed* accounts studied so far. But verse 42 suggests this is not the case: “Because thou hast let go of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people.” Indeed, before the battle Ahab had been told explicitly that God would deliver the opposing army into his hands and that in so doing Ahab would “know” God (verses 13, 28). Thus, Ahab’s later actions went contrary to God’s will as he “forgot” God instead of “knowing” him.

HESED AND THE COVENANT

The above has provided us with an understanding of *hesed* as an act of deliverance, either physical or spiritual. When performed by a mortal on behalf of another, a reciprocal act is expected at some later point. When the *hesed* act is performed by God, he expects obedience, ultimately exemplified in

hesed acts performed on behalf of others, since we cannot truly reciprocate in kind to God. *Hesed* is associated with the concept of truth and is thus a reliable, “real” concept that we can trust. God’s reliability is proven by his acts of *hesed*, which in turn demonstrate his continued, conscious awareness of the individual who receives the act of *hesed*. In some cases, the very knowledge that has “remembered” his people is the act of *hesed* that delivers them in the time of need.

As significant as these insights are, they do not answer one important question: why is *hesed* performed? Many have noted that a relationship exists between performing *hesed* and participation in a covenant relationship.²⁰ Certainly this has been borne out in the *hesed* references listed above. In at least four relationships, *hesed* is expected of one who enters, or who has already been engaged in, a covenant. Abraham and Abimelech established a covenant between themselves and their offspring, promising *hesed* from both, and established because one did *hesed* earlier. Similarly, Jonathan and David entered into a covenant promising to do *hesed* for one another and their descendants. Though the covenant relationship between Abraham and Sarah is not explicit, it is their marriage that Abraham relied on for *hesed* on his behalf. Even the example of Ahab and the Syrian king, though not a true *hesed* act, demonstrates that covenants were associated with the performance of *hesed*. Psalm 25:10 tells us, “All the paths of the Lord are *hesed* (mercy) and truth unto such as keep his covenant,” and in Isaiah 55:3 God promises to enact *hesed* by actually entering into a covenant as he did with David: “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure *hesed* acts (mercies) of David.” In other words, the eternal covenant God makes with us is characterized by the same true, reliable *hesed* acts he did for David.²¹

Yet not all of the relationships are covenantally bound. Saul’s *hesed* act with the Kenites is not described in covenantal terms, neither are those acts between the spies of Israel and Rahab and the spies of Ephraim and the man of Bethel. Ruth may or may not be covenantally bound to Naomi, but she is certainly not yet covenantally bound to Boaz when she performs her act of *hesed* for him. Psalm 107:8 suggests that all mankind, whether or not in a covenantal relationship like Israel, should “praise the Lord for his *hesed* (goodness), and for his wonderful works to the children of men!” Thus, it is not just a covenant that brings about *hesed* and therefore cannot be the only

factor in which *hesed* is done. So what else is there? Two verses in the Old Testament provide one other reason for God's *hesed* acts. In Jeremiah 9:24 the Lord reveals, "I am the Lord which exercise *hesed* (lovingkindness), judgment and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight." Micah points out that "he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in *hesed* (mercy)" (Micah 7:18). In other words, God performs *hesed* because he likes to do it. It is more than simply his responsibility to do so because of his covenant relationship; it is his desire to continue doing this work.

"GREAT IS HIS MERCY"

Moses declared the idea that God desires to do *hesed* when he stated that delivering man is not just God's work, but also his glory. He loves what he does and thus the full meaning of *hesed* is revealed, for while it is an act predominantly done by God, his expectation is that those who experience his *hesed* should do so as well. This, in turn, suggests that *hesed* is ultimately revealed to teach us how to act like a God. In other words, as we perform *hesed*, we find ourselves doing the same things God does—of course, not necessarily to the same degree or magnitude. Thus we too engage in the work of deliverance. Whether those works are big or small, each one instructs us on our obligations as Gods-in-training to our fellow men and God. We may begin these obligations in covenantal relationships, but these relationships allow us to learn how to "delight" in performing *hesed*. If salvation is becoming like God, then the doctrine of *hesed*, as presented in the Old Testament, revealing his divine nature and illuminating ours, may be one of the most important principles we can learn.

Daniel L. Belnap is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

Daniel L. Belnap, "How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of *Hesed*," in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 170–86.

NOTES

1. The first letter of this Hebrew word is what is known as a guttural and represents a sound that is not common in the English language. As awkward as this consonantal cluster may be, it is the best approximation of an English translation.
2. Gordon R. Clark, “חַסֵּד—A Study of a Lexical Field,” in *Abr-Nahrain* 30 (1992), 34: “It is widely acknowledged that חַסֵּד . . . is extremely difficult to translate into English—and, for that matter, into many other languages. . . . The King James Version used mercy words 155 times, kindness words 43 times, lovingkindness 30 times, goodness words 14 times, but love words are never used. In the Revised Standard Version, love words occur 182 times, kindness words 29 times, loyalty words 21 times, but mercy words only twice.” For Clark’s more comprehensive study on *hesed*, see Gordon R. Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 157 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993). Beyond Clark’s study mentioned above, two excellent studies are Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 17 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978) and “*hesed*” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* V, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 44–64.
3. Not all 245 references need to be reviewed, since many of them are found in formulaic expressions that are repeated again and again. Where the formulas or textual narrative provide insight into the meaning of *hesed*, these references are discussed.
4. The verb *shew* is the Middle English spelling of the modern *show*. The translation of the verb as “shew” may be to emphasize the visible, manifesting nature of acts of *hesed*, yet this translation implies a passivity that is not necessarily found in the original Hebrew.
5. In order to emphasize *asah* (“doing”) and *hesed*, I have provided my own translations of the Bible passages cited in this paper. For purposes of comparison, I have also included the original KJV text in parentheses.
6. According to some Jewish sources, the very purpose of the book of Ruth is to teach about *hesed*. See Susan Schept, “Hesed: Feminist Ethics in Jewish Tradition,” in *Conservative Judaism* 57 (2004): 21–29.
7. This blessing reflects an interesting use of *hesed* in farewell benedictions. In 2 Samuel 15:20, David tells his friend Ittai the Gittite goodbye in the following manner: “Return thou, and take back thy brethren: *hesed* [mercy] and truth be with thee.”
8. Following her request for *hesed* on Ruth’s behalf, Naomi continues to ask specifically that God would “give” (the Hebrew verb *natan*) Ruth security and place in the house of a husband. In Ruth 4:13, after Ruth marries Boaz, we are told that God “gave” (*natan*) Ruth conception of a male child, securing her place and security in the house of her husband and thereby fulfilling the blessing. “At long last Ruth had the . . . place of settled security, which Naomi at first wished her (Ruth 1:9) and later schemed for her (3:1). Thus her case illustrates the biblical truth that God does reward *hesed*.” Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 267–68.
9. The act of singing in the morning about God’s *hesed* may have been a recognized Temple procedure. In 2 Chronicles 5:13, part of the ritual associated with the dedication of Solomon’s Temple included the following: “It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the Lord saying, For he is good; for his *hesed* (mercy) endureth for

- ever.” This refrain was also sung at the introduction of the ark to Jerusalem as described in 1 Chronicles 16. Hundreds of years later as Ezra was laying the foundation for the new Temple, the refrain was again sung to commemorate the event. The Psalms suggest that *hesed* was to be sung about: “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise. . . . For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations” (Psalm 100:4–5). Certainly, contemplating God’s *hesed* was a worthy Temple experience: “We have thought of thy *hesed* (lovingkindness), O God, in the midst of thy temple” (Psalm 48:9; see also Psalms 5:7; 23:6).
10. This phrase was carried down through the generations. It was still part of the priestly recital, which was recorded almost a thousand years later (Nehemiah 9:32).
 11. This verse ends Psalm 107, a psalm that begins with an exhortation to thank God for the eternal nature of his *hesed* and then goes on to recount the great acts God has done on Israel’s behalf, interspersed throughout with the refrain: “Oh that men would praise the Lord for his *hesed* (goodness), and for his wonderful works to the children of men.”
 12. In his study “On the Use and Meaning of Hosea vi. 6 in Matthew’s Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977), 107–19, David Hill suggests that the concept of *eleos/hesed* is a common theme in the arrangement of Matthew’s Gospel.
 13. Interestingly, a number of New Testament scholars suggest that this reference is alluded to in John 1:14 and that the phrase “grace and truth” found in the New Testament reference is the equivalent of “*hesed* and truth” as found here. See Anthony Hanson, “John i. 14–18 and Exodus,” in *New Testament Studies* 23 (1976): 90–101. If this is true, then we may have greater insight into the role of *hesed* as part of God’s work since the clause “grace and truth” is found throughout restoration scripture.
 14. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online version, s.v. “truth.” Similarly, the Hebrew terms translated as truth, *amunah* or *emet*, both include the same connotation of reliability, steadfastness, and unchangability.
 15. In latter-day scripture, truth is defined as knowledge “of things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13; Doctrine and Covenants 93:24). This definition coincides with the above statements, as the “realness” of a thing testifies to its reliability. Since truth does not change, it can be relied on to provide a foundation upon which to build. The contrast between the way things are and the way things appear is, at its core, one that distinguishes between that which can be relied on and that which cannot.
 16. Interestingly, in Moses 7:31, Enoch uses a similar phrase to describe the work of God: “And thou hast taken Zion to thine own bosom, from all thy creations . . . and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end.”
 17. At least three psalms appear to be prayers or songs of thanksgiving emphasizing God’s *hesed* acts: Psalms 107 and 118 begin with the refrain “O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his *hesed* (mercy) endureth for ever.” Psalm 118 also ends with this phrase.
 18. The sin of forgetting is throughout this Psalm. Verse 13 relates that Israel “soon forgot his works,” and in verse 21 “they forgot God their saviour.” According to these verses, Israel forgot God by making the golden calf and worshipping it. This latter reference reveals an important difference between biblical forgetting and our contemporary meaning. The English word *forget* means literally to “miss or lose one’s hold”; this suggests that one may wish to retain, or hold on to, but cannot. Forgetting, then, is not necessarily a conscious decision, but something that may happen by accident. The biblical term, on the other hand, has the nuance of “to ignore” or “to take lightly.” Thus, forgetting God is not the same in meaning as forgetting to pick up the milk. While one may completely forget

that instruction, when Israel made the golden calf, they didn't forget that God existed; instead, they ignored or trivialized his role.

19. This psalm actually references *hesed* four times: the first two listed here, as well as verses 21 and 26 (mentioned in an earlier section of this study). Walter Brueggemann, in his study “Psalm 109: Three Times ‘Steadfast Love,’” in *Word & World* 5, no. 2 (1985): 144–54, suggests that *hesed* is the theme of the entire psalm: “I propose that the main flow of the argument of the poem can be traced through the uses of this word” (149).
20. This is the theme of Nelson Glueck's seminal study, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: The Hebrew Union College Press, 1967).
21. The relationship between *hesed* and God's covenant with David is one recognized elsewhere in the Old Testament. Psalm 89, in particular, emphasizes the two. According to verse 28, God does *hesed* for David eternally: “My *hesed* (mercy) will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him.” In this reference, the two stand in parallel: God's *hesed* is also his covenant. This may provide an answer as to what exactly the sure *hesed* acts of David are. It is also possible that this sure *hesed* is associated with the key of David mentioned in Revelation 3:7, which appears to be the priesthood keys of kingship. David's line is promised kingship culminating in the kingship of Jesus Christ, but the Isaiah reference suggests that anyone who comes unto God can have the same covenant with the attendant *hesed* acts. Ann N. Madsen discusses the role of *hesed* and covenant briefly in her study, “His Hand Is Stretched Out Still: The Lord's Eternal Covenant of Mercy,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2002), 704–21.