

## AND HIS LOVE IS ETERNAL (Psalm 136)

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Some time ago the Sunday school leaders of my parish came to see me. They were organizing a family service during which part of Psalm 136 was to be read, and their intention was to get the children to recite the refrain which recurs at the end of each verse of this psalm. Nevertheless, they feared—and rightly so—that the children would not understand this refrain in its traditional rendering. Our usual French versions (Segond and Synodale) use the term *miséricorde* (“mercy”), “*car sa miséricorde dure éternellement*”. This word is not in current use in the French language today—unless it be in ecclesiastical language, which, as everyone knows, is not a form of speech understood by all! Moreover, while it corresponds with the Greek *eleos* used in the Septuagint, one may legitimately question whether, even if understood, it fits into the context of Ps. 136. For this reason I was asked to suggest a translation which would be more suitable for children (and at the same time more suitable for most adults). This led me to give further thought to the problem of interpreting the Hebrew term *hesed* which has frequently perplexed translators and has already given rise to discussion among the members of the Français Courant O.T. Translation Committee.

Within the scope of this article it is clearly impossible to deal with the problem as a whole. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the questions raised by the refrain of Ps. 136 can throw light on some aspects of this problem, and consequently help translators in dealing with other passages as well.

### What do the Best Known Versions Say?

The first stage of my research consisted in looking at a number of English and French versions to see how they have rendered this term *hesed* in Ps. 136. I was impressed on the one hand by the variety of translations adopted and on the other hand by a certain development in the manner in which this term is treated.

In English the Authorized Version and Revised Version have *mercy*; then we find *lovingkindness* in the American Standard Version (as in the more recent Living Bible), *steadfast love* in the Revised Standard Version, and finally *love* in the New English Bible and Today's English Version. (The Popular Spanish Version for South America adopts the same solution: *amor*.)

In French, *miséricorde* is used not only in the Segond and Synodale versions, as mentioned above, but also in Maredsous. Elsewhere we have *bonté* “goodness” (Crampon), *amour* “love” (Jérusalem), *grâce* “grace” (Dhorme, Chouraqui), *fidélité* “faithfulness” (Osty).

The development shown by these different translations is interesting. From the idea of “mercy” *miséricorde*, the pity whereby the guilty one is forgiven, we move on to the idea of “goodness” or “love”. This is broader than the first concept, as it not only implies pity, willingness to forgive

(which would fit into other contexts), but in addition the willingness to do good in a general way, which fits in better with Ps. 136 as a whole. However, it would be preferable to use a term other than “goodness” *bonté* to contrast with “good” *bon* in the first line of v. 1. (In view of the parallelism in the first two lines of this verse, it is probable that in repeating the concept expressed by the adjective “good”, *hesed* emphasizes it, and this must be taken into account in translation.) The word “grace” *grâce* (Dhorme and Chouraqui) can also be understood in a wider sense than “mercy” *miséricorde*, but it is likely to meet with a rather vague response in the minds of people who are not familiar with biblical language. As to “faithfulness” *fidélité* (Osty), this term is tied up with an interpretation to which I shall return later. For the time being I have two comments to make: 1. The use of the term “faithfulness” immediately raises a question in the mind of the reader or the listener: faithfulness to whom or to what? This would need to be made clear in a popular language translation. 2. If the TEV rendering “and his love is eternal” is adopted, it will be noticed that the idea of faithfulness is implied in “is eternal”, for an eternal love is necessarily faithful!

In concluding this first section I should like to mention the solution adopted by Jean-Marc Babut, member of the Français Courant O.T. Translation Committee. After various trial efforts this is the version he selected: “*Oui, pour toujours il nous est favorable*” (lit. “Yes, for ever he is favourable to us.”) This translation highlights God’s relation with man implied by his *hesed*: God’s goodness is not a goodness which he keeps to himself, but rather a goodness which is active on behalf of men (“us”). This relation need not necessarily be expressed so clearly in a refrain which, as we shall see, is of a distinctly liturgical character—at least that is the reservation some people will not fail to put forward in regard to this translation. Nevertheless, this solution is an interesting one. It will no doubt help translators whose languages lack nouns corresponding to love or goodness, and, moreover, it is in keeping with what the whole psalm expresses—it is the people who are invited to sing the goodness of God on their behalf.

### The Point of View of the Experts

After looking at several versions and noticing their diversity, I turned to the experts—authors of commentaries and dictionary articles, or articles on biblical theology. This led me to open among others the French commentary on the Psalms by Maillot and Lelièvre.<sup>1</sup> The commentary on Ps. 136 is in the third volume, pages 203–6. Better than other commentaries it raises a number of questions relating to the use of *hesed* in the refrain. Starting with Maillot and Lelièvre’s comments on the subject, I shall proceed to define the position taken up by various experts.

1. Maillot and Lelièvre emphasize the liturgical nature of the psalm, and particularly the refrain, which was recited by the assembly on a feast day. The liturgical value of the refrain is confirmed by its use in other O.T. texts (cf. Ps. 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1–4, 29; 1 Chron. 16:34; 2 Chron. 5:13).

<sup>1</sup> Labor & Fides, Geneva, 3 vols. 1961, 1966 and 1969. A second, revised, version of the first volume was published in 1972.

Moreover, the whole of v. 1 is found again in Ps. 106:1 and 118:1. With regard to translation this means that the translator will have to be careful to translate the formula in the same way in the different passages in which it occurs, and this in a style appropriate to its liturgical nature.

2. As to the term *hesed*, these same authors state that, "as everyone knows, the word *hesed*, rendered here by 'love', is a term which defies all translation." This does not prevent them from adding further on: "That is why this term can equally well be translated by love as by grace or faithfulness, with the one condition of knowing that this divine *hesed* was continually given a concrete form in particular works." Is it true then to say that this term defies all translation? The diverse ways in which it has been translated (to which reference has been made above) and the difficulty experienced by translators whenever they come across this term, could well be considered as arguments supporting a "yes" answer to this question. And yet Maillot and Lelièvre's statement is based on a very common error: a term is studied away from context. All its possible meanings are considered, and frequently it is also given a theological content which does not belong to this term alone but to the entire context in which it sometime occurs. Then the conclusion is reached that it is impossible to find in any other language a term capable of conveying all this "wealth of meaning". Now, the important thing in really understanding and conveying in translation the meaning of a passage is to study the way in which the individual words of the passage have been put together, and not to examine all the possible meanings of each word on its own. It is true that the individual words can have different meanings, but, as Nida and Taber state, "in most instances the surrounding context points out quite clearly which of these basic meanings of a word is intended".<sup>2</sup>

The term *hesed* is used 245 times in the O.T. in different contexts, composed at different periods and in different settings—and one must not forget that language changes over the years. It would be wrong to try to find in another language one single term capable of rendering *hesed* in all the places where it occurs in the O.T. (This statement has a general value, since nowhere in the world are there any two languages whose vocabularies are equivalent word for word. To prove this one has only to look at any bilingual dictionary.) But it will always be possible to find a satisfactory solution in a given context by discovering in the receptor language the word which corresponds with the meaning conveyed in this context in the source language. If the problem does not find a ready solution one must be careful not to confuse the *difficulty* in translating a term in a given passage with the *impossibility* of doing so.

3. Maillot and Lelièvre state further that, "*hesed* . . . expresses the fundamental relationship which God established with his people by the covenant." This statement contains nothing new, as it is in line with a thesis defended by Nelson Glueck some fifty years ago, and simply reaffirmed by numerous authors without critical examination. Glueck's study first appeared in German in 1927 (reprinted in 1961); it was published more recently in an English translation, *Hesed in the Bible*. According to Glueck, *hesed* is not a

<sup>2</sup> *Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden, Brill, 1969, p. 56.

goodness which is as it were spontaneous and gratuitous; it is rather a mode of behaviour conforming with the rights and duties determining human relations (husband and wife, parents and children, ruler and subjects, etc.). These ordered relationships are each considered as covenants (in a biblical perspective). When applied to God, this term refers to the fulfilment of the promises which accompanied the sealing of the covenant; in other words it denotes God's faithfulness in keeping his covenant (cf. Osty's rendering of this term by "faithfulness" *fidélité* in the refrain of Ps. 136). The concept of goodness would only be a secondary meaning. Within the framework of the covenant this *hesed* must be reciprocal, for God expects his people to give proof of it in their relationship with him and with others. Thus, as far as Glueck is concerned, *hesed* could also be defined as "the substance of the covenant".

Edmund Jacob, in his *Theology of the Old Testament*,<sup>3</sup> accepts almost without reservation Glueck's thesis on the link between *hesed* and covenant. He states for example that the merit of Glueck's work lies in the fact that he has shown the relationship between *hesed* and the covenant, an interpretation which appeared to be so convincing that L. Koehler replaced in his lexicon the usual translation, "mercy, goodness, faithfulness", with "responsibility in the community, bond, solidarity". For Jacob the idea of goodness and mercy is secondary to that of solidarity or quite simply loyalty. Now, I must say that what seems to me unsatisfactory, whether in this chapter of Jacob's work or in the article on *hesed* in Koehler-Baumgartner's dictionary, is precisely the role played by Glueck's thesis which tends to impose a predetermined solution to every context.

P. van Imschoot, in his article "Grâce" in the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la Bible*, is more flexible. True, he also sees in *hesed* the faithful help which can be expected from one's neighbour, especially one with whom a covenant has been made, and adds that this help is an obligation resulting from solidarity. But he goes on to say: "Nevertheless, the help given can also be the result of goodness, especially coming from a more powerful person; so that *hesed* can also signify goodness or grace." In so far as God's *hesed* is concerned, he states that it "is based on the covenant . . . into which he entered voluntarily with his people", but he acknowledges that in some contexts this is not only "assistance but also grace whereby sins are forgiven". (See for example Ex. 34:6).

Nevertheless, as early as 1950 Glueck's thesis came in for criticism on the part of H. J. Stoebe on account of its over-legalistic and formalized approach. According to Stoebe, the important thing to grasp in trying to understand God's *hesed* is the fact that God looks upon man with a goodness and generosity free from any conditions, and he "renounces his divine right in order to establish communion with man". It will not be a surprise, therefore, to learn that Stoebe gave the title of "*Hesed-Güte*" ("goodness") to his article on *hesed* published in Jenni-Westermann's dictionary, although he realizes that "goodness" is not really an adequate rendering of the Hebrew

<sup>3</sup> Delachaux & Niestlé, Neuchâtel, 1955. English translation Hodder & Stoughton, 1958.

term in every context. I recommend this article<sup>4</sup> to readers who understand German. Taking care not to follow a predetermined line, Stoebe systematically analyses the different contexts of *hesed* from the point of view of syntax, semantics (concerning the relation between *hesed* and various other Hebrew terms, particularly those belonging to the same area of meaning), history, literature and theology. It is impossible to summarize such a detailed and comprehensive study. Nevertheless, its merit lies in the fact that it is based on a method which is much sounder linguistically than other studies devoted to the same subject, and therefore justice is done to a wide variety of contexts where *hesed* occurs.

I should just like to add the following: the link between *hesed* and covenant (Hebr. *berith*) is only explicit in a few texts (particularly Deut. 7:9, 12 and texts related to this Deuteronomistic tradition: 1 Kings 8:23; Neh. 1:5; 9:32; 2 Chron. 6:14; cf. also Dan. 9:4; Ps. 89:29; Isa. 55:3). It would be wrong to look for this relationship in all the other contexts, and quite artificial to state that this meaning is implicit there. For example, when the texts say that "the earth is full of the *hesed* of the Lord (Ps. 33:5; 119:64), one could hardly state that this refers to the help which God gives to his people within the framework of the covenant. As far as Ps. 136 is concerned, there is nothing in the context to indicate this link between *hesed* and covenant. (Note particularly that this psalm, while speaking of the departure from Egypt and the wanderings in the desert, makes no reference whatsoever to the great enactment in Sinai.) We do not, therefore, need to take this into account in translating *hesed* here.

4. Returning to Maillot and Lelièvre's commentary, it seems to me that their most interesting contribution is the relation they establish in Ps. 136 between the context and the *hesed* of the refrain: "The psalm seeks among other things to show us the incomparable measure of this *hesed*." (All the more reason, I would add, not to narrow down its scope too much.) Indeed, this term is used in connection with Creation (vv. 4-9), with the deliverance granted to Israel (vv. 10-22), and with the protection and help which God gives to his children (vv. 24-25). Even though the refrain clearly has a liturgical and traditional character, it is not out of place to consider that the whole contents of the psalm help to bring out its meaning. The whole emphasis is on the work of God, without reciprocal action on the part of man, unless it be praise. On this point we may quote von Rad: "A characteristic of all these conventional formulas which are mainly associated with worship is that they all concentrate exclusively on the action of God. Israel is the silent and passive object of the Lord's action."<sup>5</sup> So this hymn of praise extols the sovereign goodness of God, Creator of all things, and the extraordinary nature of this goodness demonstrated in God's gifts to those whom he protects.

<sup>4</sup> In *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, Munich/Zurich, vol. 1, 1971, cols. 600-621.

<sup>5</sup> G. von Rad, *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament*, French translation, Labor et Fides, vol. 1, Geneva 1963, p. 247.

### Conclusion

It is time we returned to the question raised at the beginning of this article: How should one translate the refrain of Ps. 136 so as to bring it within the reach of children? In the text I prepared for them I put: "*Oui, son amour dure éternellement*" (lit. "Yes, his love lasts eternally"; cf. TEV "And his love is eternal"). We saw above that Maillot and Lelièvre accept the translation of *hesed* by "love", "with the one condition of knowing that this divine *hesed* was continually given a concrete form in particular works." Now, one only needs to read this psalm carefully to see that this is precisely what it does. There is no need to state in the refrain or in a footnote that this love of God is an active love; this term, which recurs in every second line, is illustrated over and over again as God's works are recalled at the beginning of each verse. The question raised by Maillot and Lelièvre only arises if the term is isolated; it is pointless when considering the place this term occupies in the psalm as a whole. I would stress these last words, as they tie up with a principle which is of greatest importance: in order to convey in translation the meaning of a passage, the translator must consider how the words are put together in the source language and the receptor language; the weight of the message is not carried by one word alone but by a group of words arranged in a certain order.

Again, it does not seem to me necessary to specify in the refrain the relational aspect of this *hesed* (that is to say that this love is not simply a sentiment but is active on behalf of men); this also is clearly expressed in the context, particularly in what is said about God's deliverance of his people. Moreover, I have already mentioned that if importance is attached to the idea of faithfulness, this is implicit in the words "*dure éternellement*" ("lasts eternally"). Finally, in this context it seems to me wrong to try to bring out an element of obligation, of communal responsibility tied up with a commitment. God's goodness is amazing and extraordinary; it is really a favour, a gift which extends beyond any of the legal bounds within which attempts have been made to contain it. It is the source of all the creative and liberating acts of God.

To sum up, that which in *hesed* "defies all translation", as some claim, is in fact translated in a most spectacular way in this whole psalm.

#### PLEASE NOTE

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