

Mercy in the Gospels

“Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish”

-Pope Francis, Easter 2013.

Ḥemlah, ḥamal

Raḥamîm, raḥam, raḥûm

Ḥesed, ḥasîd

Ḥanînah, ḥen



Eleos, eleēmosunē, eleeō, eleemōn

Splagchna eleous, splagchnizomai

Oiktimos, oiktirō

Charis, charizomai, charitoō

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OUR CONTEXT

- Where is the call to mercy today?

THE LANGUAGE OF MERCY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

There are three main “mercy” word-groups in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- **ḥesed** (noun, generally translated as steadfast love or loving kindness); **ḥasîd** (adjective, meaning gracious, constant, merciful, kind);
- **raḥamîm** (noun, usually translated as mercy or compassion); **raḥam** (verb); **raḥûm** (adjective);
- **ḥemlah** (noun, translated as pity, mercy, or compassion); **ḥamal** (verb, meaning to spare, to have pity, to have compassion).



Luke 10:25-37 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 10:26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" 10:27 He answered, "You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." 10:28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." 10:29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 10:30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 10:31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 10:32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 10:33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, **he was moved with compassion (*esplagchnisthē*)**. 10:34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 10:35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' 10:36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" 10:37 He said, **"The one who showed him mercy."** Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Another related word group merits attention:

- **ḥen** (noun, meaning grace or favour) and its cognates **ḥanan** (verb, to be gracious or merciful); **ḥanûn** (adjective, meaning benevolent or merciful); **ḥanînah** (a noun that appears only once and means grace or mercy).

Mercy is always a relational concept. It is predicated of both God in God's covenant relationship with God's people and of God's people in their relationships with one another. One shows or does or demonstrates mercy. Mercy can be withheld or withdrawn. Each word group conveys particular and distinctive refractions of mercy, although at times they can be used almost synonymously.

The **ḥesed** word group has connotations of loyalty, fidelity, and constancy. It is often associated with hospitality, denoting right relationship between host and guest. In the Greek Bible it can be translated in a variety of ways: as **eleos**, **eleemosunē**, **oiktirmos**, **charis**, or even **dikaïosunē** which is generally used to translate the Hebrew **sedeqah** meaning justice in the sense of right relationship.

The **raḥamîm** group derives from **rḥm**, the Hebrew for "womb". It contains elements of deeply experienced emotion expressed in action to alleviate suffering. Compassion, womb compassion, gut love, parental love, pity communicate something of the meaning of this concept. In the Greek, translations include **eleos** and its cognates, **oiktirmos**, or very occasionally **splagchnon**, **splagchnizomai** (literally, to be moved in one's bowels or inner parts or the depths of one's being).

The third group, **ḥemlah** and **ḥamal**, appears less frequently than the first two word groups. It has two semantic fields, namely "to spare" as in sparing a captive, and to have compassion or pity on those who are outcast or suffering.

A STORY OF WOMEN IMPELLED BY MERCY

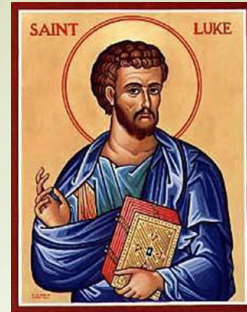


Exodus 1:15-2:10 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 1:16 "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." 1:17 But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 1:18 So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 1:19 The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." 1:20 So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 1:21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. 2:1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2:2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 2:3 When she could hide him

1:72 Thus God has shown the mercy (*eleos*) promised to our ancestors, and has remembered God's holy covenant,1:78 By the tender mercy (*splanchna eleous*) of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 1:79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Luke 7:11-16 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 7:12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 7:13 When Jesus saw her, **he had compassion for her** and said to her, "Do not weep." 7:14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 7:15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 7:16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on God's people!"

**FOCUSSING ON LUKE,
a well-spring of "mercy".**



Luke 1:28, 30, 46-54, 68-79

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, **favor**ed one (**kecharitōmenē**)! ..." ...1:30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found **favor (charis)** with God....

1:46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies our God, 1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 1:48 for God has looked with favor (*charis*) on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. 1:50 God's mercy (*eleos*) is for those who fear God from generation to generation. 1:51 God has shown strength with God's arm, has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts., 1:52 has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 1:53 has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 1:54 God has helped God's servant Israel, **in remembrance of God mercy (*eleos*)**"....

no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 2:4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 2:5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. **2:6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him,** "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 2:7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 2:8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 2:9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 2:10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."



MERCY IN THE PSALMS

Psalm 25:6 Be mindful of your **mercy (raḥamîm)** O God, and of your **steadfast love (hesed)**, for they have been from of old;

40:11 Do not withhold **your mercy (raḥamîm)** from me; let your **steadfast love (hesed)** and **your faithfulness [emet]** keep me safe forever;

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your **steadfast love (hesed)**; according to your abundant **mercy (raḥamîm)** blot out my transgressions;

69:16 Answer me, O God, for your **steadfast love (hesed)** is good; according to your abundant **mercy (raḥamîm)**, turn to me;

79:8 Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors; let your **compassion (raḥamîm)** come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low.

108:4 For your **steadfast love (hesed)** is higher than the heavens, and your **faithfulness ('emet)** reaches to the clouds.

THE LANGUAGE OF MERCY IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

In the Christian Scriptures, there are three main “mercy-related” and one other minimally related word group:

- **eleos** (noun meaning mercy, pity, compassion) and its cognates **eleeō** (verb, to have mercy, pity, compassion); **eleē-mosunē** (noun, almsgiving, works of mercy, works of charity); **eleēmōn** (adjective, merciful);
- **splagchna** (plural noun, literally entrails, bowels, or guts; metaphorically denoting the depths of one’s being or the locus of heartfelt compassion, compassion); **splagchnizomai** (verb, to have compassion or pity in the depths of one’s being);
- **oiktirmos** (noun, pity, compassion, mercy, sympathy, usually in the plural form); **oiktirō** (verb, one occurrence only, to have pity, mercy, compassion); **oiktirmōn** (adjective, one occurrence only, compassionate, merciful);
- **charis** (noun, grace, favour, credit, joy) is included because in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, it frequently renders the Hebrew **hesed** and because it is sometimes explicitly linked with **eleos** in the Christian Scriptures; cognates **charizomai** (verb, to give, forgive, show favour, set free); **charitoō** (verb, to bless, show grace, with God as subject); **charisma** (verbal noun, evidence of favour, benefit, gift).