

Mary Recalls the Covenants, Luke 1:54–55; Jeremiah’s Prophecy of the Regathering of Israel, Jer 31:1–4; Mercy (*Cheseth*): the Unfailing Love of God; Mary’s Double Entendre in Luke 1:54; the “Mercy” of the Virgin Birth

Jeremiah 31:2 - This is what the Lord says, “The people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert; I will come to give rest to Israel.”

In this verse Jeremiah uses a past deliverance to illustrate the ultimate restoration at the Second Advent. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians completed their three-year siege of the Northern Kingdom taking many Jews hostage while those left behind were in dire straits and thus compared with the Jews of the Exodus generation who wandered the Jornada for forty years. The phrase “rest to Israel” speaks of the perfect environment of the millennial kingdom.

Jeremiah 31:3 - The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with lovingkindness [**רַחֲמִים** *cheseth*].

With the prepositional phrase, “in the past,” Jeremiah goes back in time to illustrate the future deliverance of Israel.

In past encounters the love of God for Israel never failed. It is enduring, everlasting, and unconditional, i.e., unfailing, as is amplified by this excerpt:

Divine *cheseth* counteracts God’s wrath. At times the biblical text suggests that God’s *own* response to human sin runs in opposite directions. At such moments, God’s *cheseth* exercises an ameliorating or limiting role upon this wrath. Micah asks, “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry for ever, but delight to show mercy (*cheseth*)” (Mic 7:18). When the author of Lamentations searches for God’s good hand in calamity, he finds it in the confidence that God’s love will outlast his anger: “For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love (*cheseth*)” (Lam 3:31–32). The insight that, while both anger and love are appropriate divine responses, the latter outlasts the former, is an important one for biblical theology. (p. 214)

Divine *cheseth* is enduring, persistent, even eternal. The biblical writers celebrate the everlastingness of God’s *cheseth*. This is seen by way of contrast with things that are long-lasting but that may not last forever. For example, Isa. 54:10a reads, “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love (*cheseth*) for you will not be shaken.” In Hos 6:4, God’s *cheseth* is, by implication, contrasted favorably with that of Ephraim and Judah: “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love (*cheseth*) is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.” More often, though, the persistent nature of God’s love is simply stated. Sometimes, this is heard from God’s own mouth. For example, in Jer 31:3 God finds that present declension cannot prevent future restoration of Israel, for “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness (*cheseth*).”¹ (p. 215)

In the next verse the Lord amplifies his unfailing love by addressing Israel as a virgin:

Jeremiah 31:4 - “I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful.

How can the Lord view Israel as a virgin? By the work of the coming Messiah. He will wash not only the Jews white as snow but the Gentile peoples as well.

¹ D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, “**רַחֲמִים**,” in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:214–15.

Mary is instrumental in accomplishing this objective. It is through a virgin that the virgin-born Messiah's true humanity will enter into history and "rebuild" Israel. The final two verses in Mary's Magnificat stress this concept:

Luke 1:54 - "He has given help to Israel His servant / In remembrance of His mercy [ἔλεος, *eleos*], /

v. 55 - "As He spoke to our fathers, / To Abraham and his descendants forever."

The Greek word for "mercy" is *eleos* whose counterpart in the Old Testament is *cheseth*. Each has a synonym. For *eleos* there is **οἰκτιρμός, oiktirmos**. *Eleos* is generally translated "mercy" while *oiktirmos* is usually translated "compassion."

Likewise in the Old Testament: *cheseth* is often accompanied by **רַחֵם racham**. *Cheseth* is generally translated "mercy" while *racham* is usually translated "compassion."

In the language of later Judaism *cheseth* and *racham* can hardly be distinguished any more than *eleos* and *oiktirmos*. That is, the four terms are synonymous and are used interchangeably.²

In Luke 1:54, Mary, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, uses a dramatic double entendre with the word *eleos*. She is a Jew. She knows the Old Testament; she speaks Aramaic and knows Hebrew. The New Testament is written in Koine Greek and in this case the quote of Mary's Magnificat is recorded by Luke.

Here then is the double entendre: *Racham* is a feminine noun. When the plural form was used, the author had in mind the idea of compassion or mercy. When the singular form of this word was used it always signified the physical womb of a woman. The Old Testament authors thought of the womb as the seat of warm and tender emotions. Luke uses the *masculine singular* of *eleos* and thus together with Mary's choice of words and the definite synonymous nature of the two terms "mercy" and "womb," Mary speaks of God's unfailing love for Israel demonstrated in this context by the virgin birth of the Messiah's true humanity from the source of Mary's womb.

"He has given help to Israel," speaks of the unfailing love of God regardless of the multiple times the Israelites deviated from the Law and took up idolatrous worship of the heathen nations around her.

God was able to be merciful to Israel because their sin would be eventually dealt with through the vicarious sacrifice of the promised Messiah. The Anointed One would enter history as an act of mercy through the womb of a virgin according to:

Isaiah 7:14 - "The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel."

The unconditional covenants hinge on the fulfillment of this prophecy. The Abrahamic promised a chosen people: the Israelites; the Palestinian promised a nation: Israel; the Davidic promised an eternal King: Immanuel (God with us), namely, Jesus who is the Christ.

What God promised to Abraham and David can only be fulfilled by a Monarchy: the rule of one man in the interest of the common good. That one man must be perfect humanity, free of a sin nature, free of imputed sin, and free of volitional sin. That one Man is Jesus of Nazareth:

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Acts 4:12 - There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

² Rudolf Bultmann, "ἔλεος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 2:481.

Titus 3:5 - He saved us, not on the basis of works which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

v. 6 - whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

The God-Man Jesus entered into this world my means of divine mercy through the pregnancy of a virgin, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy:

Luke 1:26 - Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth,

v. 27 - to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

Upon receiving the annunciation from Gabriel, Mary expressed her exultation and joy with the singing of her Magnificat:

Luke 1:46 - And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord,

v. 47 - And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

v. 48 - "For He has had regard for the humble state of His slave woman; / For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

v. 49 - "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; / And holy is His name.

v. 50 - "And His mercy—unfailing love—is upon generation after generation / Toward those who fear Him.

v. 51 - "He has done mighty deeds with His omnipotence; / He has scattered those who were arrogant in the thoughts of their heart.

v. 52 - "He has brought down tyrants from their thrones, / And has exalted those who were humble.

v. 53 - "He has filled the hungry with good things; / And sent away the rich empty handed.

v. 54 - "He has given help to Israel His servant, / Remembering His unfailing love through Mary's womb, /

v. 55 - As He spoke to our fathers, / To Abraham and his descendants forever."

This passage is called Magnificat:

The hymn of praise by Mary found in Luke 1:46–55 and incorporated into the liturgical services of the Western churches (at Vespers). Named after its first line in Latin ("Magnificat anima mea Dominum," or "My soul magnifies the Lord"), the Magnificat is reminiscent of ... the "Song of Hannah," the mother of Samuel. The Magnificat has been chanted in all eight modes of the plainsong and has been the subject of numerous other settings by various composers up to the 20th century.³

This passage was put to music as early as 1539. Lyrics based on Luke 1:46–55 have followed over the centuries including one by W. W. J. VanOene in 1966.

³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed., s.v.: "Magnificat."