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The Main Hebrew Words for Love: Ahab and Hesed

Cezar-Paul Hârlăoanu

*PhD.Cand.Rev.
Faculty of Orthodox Theology,
“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, ROMANIA*

Abstract:

The Hebrew Bible uses more words to express the feeling of love. Sometimes the words used have different meanings and they can cover a great semantic area: love, mercy, kindness, and compassion. The most used Hebrew words are ahab and hesed, and each of them refers to a different kind of love. Also, each is related with human and divine love.

Keywords: *ahab, hesed, love, Abraham, Rahab, David*

For the modern readers of the Bible, the text itself doesn't have any particular significance, except, of course, the ones which are involved in the translation. Biblical scholars are able to see the difference between the original text and its translation in modern languages. There are many ancient words which don't have a correspondent in modern languages or, when translated, they lose their special meaning. Not all the time are modern words capable of showing the exact feelings of the men from Ancient Near East. It is necessary to improve our knowledge of ancient languages so that we can get closer to the exact meaning of the ancestors. Speaking about the Hebrew Bible, we will see that it is necessary to have better skills of Hebrew language because in this way the possibility of understanding the divine words will be even greater.

This paper pursues this line of thinking, intending to show the necessity of lowering ourselves to the original words of the Bible. The paper focuses on the Hebrew words for love, especially the most important ones.

The Hebrew Bible uses more words to describe the affection which implies a subject (the person who shows affection) and an object (the receiver of that affection). Biblical scholars speak of at least five verbs with this meaning. The first one is אָהַב (ahab) and it is the most used verb

to describe the affectionate feeling. The second important word for affection is *hesed*. Other words used to describe love are *הַשֵּׂק* – *hasaq*, *רַחֵם* – *rhm* (from this root comes the *רַחֲמִים*-*rahamim* which means mercy), *דוּד* – *dod* (Lipinski 1987: 51; Palmer 1995: 344)

This paper will focus only on the first two of them, which are the most important ones (Morris 1981: 85). The purpose is to show the real meaning of each term, and also to give some examples of biblical texts. Also, the focus will be mostly on the way *ahab* and *hesed* reflect human behavior.

אַהַב (ahabh)

The lexical analysis of the Hebrew Bible shows that the main word used to describe love is derived from the *ahab* roots (Stauffer 1993: 21). *Ahab*'s etymology is quite uncertain because not even the academic circles have a precise opinion. There have been attempts to associate *ahab* with the Arabic word *habba*, a word which means to breath hard or to be excited. Also it has been associated with another Arabic word *ihab*, which meant skin (Wallis 1977: 102). Other scholars have suggested that *ahab* could come from a root which in its origins meant to desire (Tambasco 1996: 567). Anyway, *ahb* doesn't appear only in the Hebrew Bible but also in some other texts of the Jewish culture and it has connections with a few Semitic dialects (Wallis 1977: 101). The term has been identified by some biblical scholars as being part of juridical vocabulary present in Ancient Near East international treaties, long before being used in Israel (Moran 1963: 77-78 quoted in L'Hour 1966: 33). In the Bible, *ahab* appears approximately 200 times as a verb (Sakenfeld 1992: 376) and almost 50 times as a noun (Wallis 1977: 102). There are other scholars who count 208 Old Testament appearances of the verb *ahab* (Morris 1981: 9).

It is interesting to see that *ahab* covers a quite big area of meanings starting from the physical attraction between two person of opposite sex to God's love for Israel. It has been noticed that some scholars preferred mostly *ahab* for describing the relation between Yahweh and Israel (Henry 2002: 387) and they sustained that the use of *ahab* is restricted only to God's love for His people and Israel's response to this love (Whybray 2002: 53). The significance of *ahab* is a special one, because it

represents a very strong feeling, like an inner force which gives impulse in performing a pleasant action, in obtaining the desired object or in assuming the self sacrifice for the happiness of the loved ones (Palmer 1995: 344).

The semantic area of ahab is a very generous one, since the dictionaries use it to show the love between two humans: a man's love for his woman or for his wife and vice-versa; parents' love for their children, a slave's love for his or her master, a neighbor's love and also the love for a foreigner or a friend. Ahab can also express the love for different things, such as food, drink and etc. From this mundane point of view our sight is moving to the celestial place because ahab is also used to express human love for God. Most importantly, ahab represent God's love for the entire world such as men, particular persons, Jerusalem or Israel (Brown and Driver and Briggs, : 12-13; Wallis 1977: 104; Eichrodt 1961: 250; Oord 2004: 5; Toombs 1965: 402).

Ahab as erotic love

First of all, we shall shortly analyse the first meaning of ahab, the one that underlines the sexual attraction between man and woman. According to F. Gangloff ahab belongs to sexual love in ancient texts of the Near East (Gangloff 1999: 20). The love between Isaac and Rebekah is the first biblical testimony for this kind of love: וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבָהּ (wayyqqa et-ribqa wattedhi-lo leissa wayye'ehabeha) „so she became his wife, and he loved her” (Genesis 24, 67). In this case the biblical author uses the verb אָהַב in pa'al (qal) imperfect (יֵאָהֲבָהּ) to show Isaac's love for Rebekah. In this text ahab is used to suggest the intimate attraction between the patriarchate and his wife.

The patriarchal story in Genesis continues to show the same meaning of ahab, as referring to sexual attraction. Isaac's son, Jacob fell in love with Rachel, Laban's daughter. To describe his feelings, the Bible uses the same word ahab: וַיֵּאָהֲבַב יַעֲקֹב אֶת־רָחֵל (wayye'ehab ya'aqob et-rahel) „Jacob was in love with Rachel” (Genesis 29, 18). It is interesting to see the Romanian translation of this text: „lui Iacov însă îi era dragă Rahila...” Anyone can realize that this view misses the erotic accent of Jacob's attraction to Rachel.

After only two verses the biblical author will show the same love between Jacob and Rachel: “so Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her” (וַיֵּאָהֲבֵהָּ be’ahabato otah). In this case, the Romanian translation is quite different too. The Romanian Bible uses the verb “pentru că o iubea”, while the Hebrew texts uses the noun. So the exact translation will be the English one: “because of his love for her” (pentru iubirea lui față de ea). The author of Genesis has very strong argument for the attraction which Jacob feels for Rachel and his indifferent attitude to Leah. In the same chapter, verse 17, those two sisters are described according to their physical look: “Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful”. Rachel’s beauty is clearly underlined by the text above. We cannot say the same about Leah’s flaw. The Jewish tradition assigns Leah’s illness to her tears. She cried for a very long time and now her eyes did not have the same sharpness as before (Midrash Rabbah 1961: 648; Ginzberg 1968: 359-360). These words explain the reason why Jacob was more attracted to Rachel than to her sister.

Another text in which abab has this carnal connotation is found in II Samuel 13, 1. The first verses of this chapter recount how Amnon, one of David’s sons, is attracted to his stepsister, Tamar. The first verse mentions Amnon’s feeling using our verb: וַיֵּאָהֲבֵהָּ אַמְנוֹן בֶּן־דָּוִד (wayye’ehabeha ammon ben-david) „Amnon, son of David, fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom”. The following verses show very clearly that Amnon was indeed attracted to his sister. It was not about a pure or brotherly love, but the most passionate attraction one can feel for a woman. The verses 12-17 stand as a proof for this idea. After abusing his stepsister, Amnon refuses to see her again. Moreover, the Bible tells us that his feelings are now opposite to those he had in the beginning: he hated her, more than he had loved her: וַיִּשְׁנֵאָהָּ אַמְנוֹן שִׁנְאָהּ (Wayysna’eha ammon sina’h gedola’h me’od ki gedola’h hassina’h aser seneah me’ahaba aser ahabah) “Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her”. The Biblical author uses four times the words from שָׂנֵא family, words which all have the meaning of hate (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 971). Not only does the repetition of the שָׂנֵא root’s family have a powerful meaning, but also the second use of the adjective

גָּדוֹל (gadol), great (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 153), has to role of underlining the intensity of Amnon's new feeling for Tamar.

Ahab is used also to reflect the feelings between other persons of opposite sex. This is the case of Leah's love for Jacob (Genesis 29, 32), Sechem's attraction to Dinah (Genesis 34, 3), Samson's love for Delilah (Judges 16, 4, 15), the love which Elkanah shows to Hannah (I Samuel 1, 5) and Michal's love for David (I Samuel 18, 20) (Imschoot 1954: 80).

All the examples above have in common the idea of sexual attraction. All, except one. The example of Elkanah and Hannah. In their story, the sexual and erotic connotation is missing and it is possible to have a short look at a pure and innocent love. The author of Samuel's book tells that "to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb" (וּלְחַנָּה יָתַן מְנָה אֶחָת אֲפִים כִּי אֶת־חַנָּה אָהַב) ulehanna yitten manah ahah appayim ki et-hanna aheb wa'yhwh sagar rahmah). LXX completes the story of Elkanah and his wife, Hanna by saying that he loved his wife just for this reason: her barren womb. The novelty LXX brings consists in connecting Elkanah's love with Hannah's impossibility of having a child. In this context the feelings Elkanah suggests more the intention of protection, of taking care of Hannah than any sexual suggestion. Even if we can speak of love between man and woman, in this case the sexual attraction is totally missing.

Ahab – family love

Another important area in which ahab is involved is that of family relations, especially that of parents for their children. This is Abraham's case who loves his son Isaac (Genesis 22, 2: "take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love"; אֶשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ ašer- ahabta). The same word is used for Isaac and Rebekah's love for their children. Only that each of them has feelings for a different child: Isaac loves Esau (וַיֵּאָהֵב יִצְחָק אֶת־עֵשָׂו) wayye'ehab yiṯhaq et-esaw) and Rebekah loves Jacob (וַרִיבְקָה אָהֵבֶת אֶת־יַעֲקֹב) waribqah ohebet et-ya'aqob) (Genesis 25, 28). This parent-child relation continues through the Genesis, because Jacob has special feelings for his son Joseph (37, 3-4: אָהַב אֶת־יוֹסֵף wa'yisrael ahab et-yosep) and for Benjamin (44, 20: וְאָבִיו אָהָבוּ we'abiw ahebo).

Some scholars (Ackerman 2002: 441) said that *ahab* is used to describe David's love for his son Amnon. But the Hebrew Bible doesn't say anything about this. II Samuel 13, 21 confesses that "when king David heard of that he was furious" (וְהַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד שָׁמַע אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֵּחַר) (וְהַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד שָׁמַע אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיֵּחַר) *wehammelek dawid sama et kol-haddebarim ha'elleh wayyihar lo me'od*). As in other cases LXX sheds light in this case, because it contains more information about David's feeling to his son: "and king David heard all these words and he was very angry and he did not aggrieved Amnon's soul, his son, because he loved him being his first born" (καὶ ἤκουσεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Δαυιδ πάντα τοὺς λόγους τούτους καὶ ἐθυμώθη σφόδρα καὶ οὐκ ἐλύπησεν τὸ πνεῦμα Ἀμνων τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ ὅτι ἠγάπα αὐτόν ὅτι πρωτότοκος αὐτοῦ ἦν – *kai ekousen o basileus David pantas tous logous toutous kai etimote sphodra kai ouk elupesento pneuma Amnon tou iou autou oti egapa auton oti prototokos autou en*). So, LXX reveals the true inner feelings which David, as a father, had for Amnon, his son.

In all the texts in which *ahab* is used to describe the relation between parents and their children, no child is described as loving his parents through *ahab*'s family words. This was the reason why it was thought that the person who makes *ahab*, who loves must be hierarchically superior to the one who receives love (Ackerman 2002: 447).

Even if this is the main use of *ahab*, there are still some instances in which *ahab* is expressed by a person who is inferior on the social scale. The perfect example is that given by the Alliance Code from Exodus 21, 5: a slave may refuse to be set free if he confesses that he loved his master. "I love my master" (וְאִם-אָמַר יְאֹמַר הָעֶבֶד אֶהְבֵּתִי אֶת-אֲדֹנָי) (*we'im-amor yomar ha'ebed ahabeti et-adoni*). The same idea can be found in Deuteronomy 15, 16. This suggests very clearly that not always is *ahab* used to describe the superior's action to a person who is beneath him on the social scale.

The fact that *ahab* is used, as we have seen, to describe the love between man and woman and that of parents for their children, constitutes an important argument for the future use of *ahab* in relation between God and man. More important is the fact that from here the image of God as husband and as father might spring.

An important aspect of ahab is connected with God's action over the world. Even so, ahab is used as an action of Yahweh only in Deuteronomy (Renaud 1963: 33). In chapter 4, verse 37 of this book the first direct confession (Konkordanz 1958: 66) that God loved Israel, more exactly his ancestors is found: "because He loved your forefathers" (אָהַבְתִּים אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם) (אָהַבְתִּים אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם). Lawrence E. Toombs (Toombs 1965: 402-403) finds a series of motives for the author of Deuteronomy to prefer ahab in expressing God's love, and not other words. The first reason is that ahab signifies such a powerful feeling that it creates a close connection between the lover and the loved one. A second reason is founded on the fact that love is an activity of all personality. Love cannot be an emotional move, an intellectual exercise or an effort of the will. Thirdly, the word suggests the source of action and not only the visible act. Finally, ahab is a word which suggests, as we have seen, a strong family relationship. It is possible that ahab should have been preferred because of its affectionate and passional dimension which it can suggest (Lapsley 2003: 351).

Hesed

After ahab, הֶסֶד (hesed) is the second term through which the Old Testament expressed love. Unlike אָהַב (ahb) roots, which could have verbal and nominal form, hesed doesn't have a verbal form. It is only a noun and only in this aspect is it found in the Hebrew Bible. Most scholars include hesed in the words which underline love, both divine and humanly, but its translation is quite different from that of אָהַב's family. Hesed means kindness, mercy (Brown, Driver and Briggs:338-339), help and brotherly love (Semen 1993: 65) and this term denotes a certain willingness between humans or between a human and God. The opening of the heart suggested by hesed is expressed through good deeds and even through human solidarity (Abma 1999: 102). The Bible shows that hesed refers both to God and to men and it is not possible to make an exact statistics of this. For example, in Pentateuch it is referred more often as a divine attribute, than as a characterization of man (Brown, Driver and Briggs:338-339; Tambasco 1996: 568).

When hesed represents an attribute of man, it can be directed to his fellows in acts of kindness, good will and mercy for those in need. Not

every action of mercy can be an act of hesed. For an action to be considered a hesed, it must accomplish certain conditions. First of all, the person who makes the request to be helped should be unable to help himself. Secondly, the hesed's action must be strictly necessary and the subject of this action may be in a close relation with the person who is in need. The last condition is that the person who really needs help should not be able to do anything to influence the answer to his/her request (Sakenfeld 1978: 44). One of the conditions that must be accomplished is that a relation should be supposed between the subject (the man who is merciful) and object (the man who receives mercy or love). This was the reason why some people thought that hesed would belong, by its nature, to the social area of family and tribal society (Zobel 1986: 51; Kuyper 1964: 5-6; Glueck 1967 38).

Human hesed and its action

Biblical texts underline very clearly this affirmation. If anyone had the curiosity to read the Hebrew text of Genesis 20, 13, that person would find there the way in which hesed becomes a part of Abraham-Sarah relation: "And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her: This is how you can show your love to me" (חסדך אשר תעשי) (hasdek aser ta'asi). Abraham's words are heated to Sarah, his wife. He makes this strange request when he is in the land of Gerar and he is afraid of what Abimelech would do to him when he sees Sarah. It's not the first time Abraham made this request to his wife. In Egypt, Abraham asked Sarah for the first time to declare she is his sister. Sarah's beauty is the main reason for this strange request of her husband. Referring to hesed, one can see that the conditions for hesed are totally fulfilled. Abraham finds himself in the impossibility of fulfilling the request he made to Sarah and neither can he force her to give an affirmative answer. Sarah's attitude depends totally on her free will. The Nuzi tablets are showing that a man could present his wife as sister, only if she accepts this (Kuen 2002: 124). And this was the hesed Sarah showed to Abraham: she accepts her husband's request, and by this she makes her own contribution to Abraham salvation. It's like an important manifestation of her feelings to the Jewish patriarch. Not only does she accept the appeal

of Abraham, but by accepting it, she is revealing her kindness, but mostly her love.

In this special case hesed is connected with two of the most profound meanings of the term, that of marriage and of the covenant (Britt 2003: 304). Some theologians (Hepner 2003: 148) consider that by being used here, hesed knows a certain “impurity” because Abraham and Sarah have an incestuous relation and they break Moses’ law. Such opinion can’t be accepted because it has nothing to do with the truth the Bible teaches. It is true that according to Moses Abraham had sinned. But Abraham lived before Moses times and in this case Paul’s words are more than adequate: “where there is no law there is no transgression” (Romans 4, 15). If Abraham had sinned, would he be still called “God’s friend and the father of the believers”?

As we have seen above, hesed is used here between family members. The same aspect is revealed by the case of Jacob’s request to his son, Joseph. In Genesis 47, 29, the patriarch Jacob asked his son: “If I found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not burry me in Egypt”. So, he is asking for kindness and faithfulness, that is to say *וְעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת* (we’asita immadi hesed we’emet). Jacob’s request stands within hesed fulfilling conditions because, first of all, he finds himself in the impossibility of doing anything to accomplish his desire; it refers to the period after his death. His wish is very simple: not to be buried in Egypt, but in the same tomb as his fathers. Jacob can’t do anything about this. Only Joseph, his powerful and influent son, can fulfill his desire. The second condition of hesed is that relations involve family members. This example is important mostly for the idea it suggests. Hesed is seen as an unlimited love (Post 2003: 18), unlimited kindness because the action it implies surpasses even death.

The use of hesed is not restricted only to the relation between relatives or persons belonging to the same tribe. It works also in the relations between hosts and guests, between allies and their relatives, between friends or rulers and the obedient (Glueck 1967: 35-37).

In the first case, the best example is the use of hesed in the Jericho’s conquest episode. The book of Joshua presents in second chapter the meeting between Rahab and the two Israelites spies. As a reward for

saving those spies, Rahab, the prostitute, asks them to act with her in the same way she did with them, that is to save her. “Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you” (v. 12 $\text{כִּי־עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד וַעֲשִׂיתֶם גַּם־אִתָּם עִם־בֵּית הָאָבִי}$ - $\text{ki-asiti immakem hased wa'asitem gam-attem im-bet abi hesed}$). In this context, hesed seems to be situated in the same semantic area as in those two cases above, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph. It's obvious that the person who expects hesed is unable to help himself. The verse itself uses twice hesed. First, it is the hesed done by Rahab to the spies, and second, it is the hesed she expects for her family. In both cases, the persons who show hesed, may or may not act as they did. It is a problem about free will. Rahab was not forced to save the spies, and they were not forced to save her family. But they had to save Rahab, as one who did the same thing for them. It is the basic rule of reciprocity. This is the reason why Rahab doesn't mention herself in this case. The attitude of the Israelites to the woman who saved them could not be hesed, meaning mercy or kindness. They were in debt to her, so their act is not an act of mercy, but an act of justice (Drucker 1998: 123).

In Rahab's case, hesed does not “respect” the rules which were present before, because Rahab has no personal or tribal relation with the spies. On the contrary, she belongs to the Canaanites tribes who were damned and who should be banished and killed. But, maybe the things are not like they seem to be. In a way, Rahab belonged to God's people. She wasn't born in the middle of Israel, but she became an Israelite through her confession “the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth bellow” (2, 11). By this confession of faith she entered God's people, as Ruth will do later (Ruth 1, 16).

Hesed is used also to describe a well known relationship, the one between David and Jonathan. The first book of Samuel tells that “Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself” (18, 1). In this case the Hebrew Bible uses the word אָהַב and it would seem that it has nothing to do with hesed words. But, by starting this point, the relation between David and Jonathan is often described by hesed. In the 20th chapter of the same book, hesed can be found three times, all used to describe David's and Jonathan's relation and, also, the relations between their heirs. David is the one who asks hesed for the first

time: “show kindness to your servant” (v. 8 על-עבדך חסד ועשית we’asita hesed al-abdeka). Jonathan asks David the same hesed to him and to his sons: “show me unfailing kindness like that of the Lord as long as I live...and do not ever cut off your kindness from my family” (v. 14-15 ולא אס-עודני תג ולא-תעשה עמדי חסד יהוה ולא אמות ולא-תכרת את-חסדך מעם ביתי – welo yim-odeni hay welo-ta’ase immadi hesed yhwh welo amut welo-takrit et-hasdeka me’im beti). This is the moment when a covenant is engaged between David and Jonathan, and from this moment on, their friendship becomes stronger than brotherhood. Hesed becomes the mark of how they act for each other (Glueck 1967: 47). The relation between David and Jonathan lives after second’s death, because hesed is involved now in a covenant relation. So, David has to keep the promise he makes. When he became king for all Israel, David is searching to see if there is anybody alive from Saul’s house. He finds out that the only person still alive was Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s son. Chapter 9, in II Samuel, presents the attitude which David had for this person. In this chapter, hesed is present three times, and two of these appearances are connected with Jonathan. First, David feels the need to show hesed to anyone from Saul’s house, for the sake of his death friend. “Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” (9, 1 לא אעשה עמו חסד בעבור יהונתן we’e’eseh immo hesed ba’abur yehonatan). In verse 3, David shows he is ready to do hesed to Saul’s heirs: “is there no one still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God’s kindness?” He speaks of God’s kindness, that is אלהים חסד (hesed Elohim). The third usage of hesed appears in the discussion between David and Mephibosheth. David says that “I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan” (v. 7). The Hebrew texts suggest how decided David was: כי עשה אעשה עמך חסד בעבור יהונתן אביך (ki asoh e’eseh immeka hesed ba’abur yehonatan abika). Through עשה repetition at qal infinitive and imperfect, the text underlines the action supposed by the verb (Currid, 2002, 76), but also the fact that the decision will stand. This is why a literarily translation will be “doing I will do with you hesed for your father Jonathan”.

David keeps his promise by giving back the land and proprieties which belonged to Saul, and by permitting Mephibosheth to eat at the king’s table (Auld 2003: 234; Brown, Fitzmayer and Murphy 2000: 157).

Not all the scholars subscribe to this opinion. There are some who think that Mephibosheth was kept prisoner in the royal palace, and that he was not allowed to gather an army (Mills 2001: 59; Mauchline 1971: 241). This opinion doesn't have a biblical support because the book of Samuel tells that Mephibosheth "was crippled in both feet" (II Samuel 4, 4; 9, 3). In Old Testament times, the king was considered to be anointed by God, and this was the reason why he was seen as having a special relation with Yahweh (Whitelom 1989: 134-135). As being set apart for God himself, the king had to have spiritual and physical integrity. If he couldn't prove these things, then he will lose his throne. The spiritual life was not always requested, but the physical integrity was necessary (Barrois 1953: 50). For example, the case of Azariah (Uzziah), who was punished with leprosy for his sin. After he got sick he lived in a separate house, and "Jotham the king's son had charge over the palace and governed the people of the land" (2 Kings 15, 5).

According to the Hebrew Bible, hesed is the mark of relations between humans. There are more biblical texts which confess that hesed should be the normal behavior of a man toward another. One of these texts, is the well known verse uttered by Hosea, "for I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (6, 6 - וְלֹא-זָבַח וְכִי הֶסֶד הַפְּצֵתִי וְלֹא-זָבַח ki hesed hapatti welo-zabah). God shows, through Hosea's words, that He loves more a merciful behavior than a bloody sacrifice. Jesus Christ uses the same words when he speaks to his listeners (Mathew 9, 13; 12, 7). The fact that Jesus is using those words is an argument for the fact that Hosea's hesed is not far away from the kingdom of God the way Christ saw it (Moffat, 1930, 17).

Hesed becomes the most important mark of those who walk on God's paths. Micah confesses that hesed is among the things God expects from us. "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6, 8 - וְאַהֲבַת הֶסֶד we'ahabat hesed).

Hesed is not only a mark of human behavior toward another human person. It can also be used to describe the human feelings toward God. It is indeed used rarely in this way, but there is a beautiful text in Jeremiah 2, 2: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me" (וְזָכַרְתִּי לְךָ הֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ zakarti lak hesed ne-urayik). In this case, hesed seems not to fit in its usual meaning. It still remains important, because

it's connected here with the image of marriage. And this is an image used to describe the relation between Yahweh and Israel, as the prophet Hosea did before (Bright 1986: 14).

In all the above cases, hesed was made by men, by human persons and it was headed to other human persons or rarely, to God. But hesed is also a divine attitude and it can represent Yahweh's mercy and kindness overflowing the entire world. In this way, divine hesed means to preserve life against death, to quicken spiritual life or to rise from the sin. And all these are made within the covenant He made with His chosen people (Brown, Driver and Briggs: 339).

Divine hesed acts differently from the human one. If the latter supposed the existence of a relation between the involved persons, things are quite different about the way hesed acts in divine sphere. Hesed has the quality of a free and unconditioned gift from God to all humanity or the special persons (Gangloff 1999: 17-18; Jaubert 1963: 60). Divine hesed manifests in different ways and it is possible to see some kind of evolution of love. The evolution has nothing to do with the increase of love. He refers to the objects of divine hesed. It moves from Israel, the chosen people, to particular persons and afterwards to the entire world (Gangloff 1999: 18-19).

An important aspect of divine hesed is found in the close relation between Yahweh and Israel. Hesed starts in Egypt and at Sinai, that is the moment God chose His people and He made a covenant with him (Beaucamp and de Pelles 1964: 106; Spieckerman 2000: 314). Within the covenant hesed reveals its full and total significance and, in time, it will become the mark of covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Glueck 1967: 47; Morris 1981: 68-69; Imschoot 1954: 66; Good 1993: 66; Gangloff 1999: 16; Eichrodt 1961: 235; Britt 2003: 285). In this covenant, hesed underlines God's fidelity as an answer to the faith of the people (Krinetzki 1970: 53-54; Anderson 1999: 60). But God's fidelity is not conditioned by people's attitude, because hesed is present even when Israel sins against God. In such moments, hesed manifests through the forgiveness of sins and after that God's relation with His people is renewed (Glueck 1967: 83).

Hesed is present for 245 times in the Old Testament (Zobel 1986: 45; Morris 1981: 65; Gangloff 1999: 17; Spieckermann 2000: 313; Britt

2003: 289). The frequency of *hesed* in each book of the Old Testament is different. *Hesed* is found 20 times in Pentateuch, 54 times in historical books, 127 times in Psalms, 13 times in sapient books and 29 times in the prophetic books (Morris 1981: 81-82; Spieckerman 2000: 313). LXX translates *hesed* by *ελεος* (*eleos*), which means mercy. *Eleos* is used to translate *hesed* for 213 times of the 245 *hesed*'s presence in Hebrew Bible (Selis 1987: 541).

This paper tried to show the importance of acceding to the Old Testament through the Hebrew language. Reading the Bible in the words of biblical authors, Hebrew or Greek, gives to the reader the exact amount of their teaching. Words like *ahab* and *hesed* are expressions of love and kindness and, as such, their usage uncover the true meaning of the Bible's teachings.

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