

Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary
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“For Unceasing is His Covenant Mercy”
A Hebrew Exegesis of Psalm 136

A paper submitted to

Professor C. J. Williams
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by

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Introduction

A survey of the Old Testament will show that a constant reminder given to the people of God is a review of their history—both in terms of having been chosen by God as a peculiar people, but also in how that identity and relationship played out through major redemptive acts. For instance, the first nine chapters of First Chronicles is a major genealogy that then zooms in on David and the monarchy, through the exile, and finally to the decree of Persian King Cyrus to return the Israelites to Jerusalem. And these reviews of Israel’s history in the Old Testament are especially focused on how God delivers them from numerous foes and often His own punishments imposed on them for their own wickedness. What has particularly peaked my interest as a relatively new psalm singer is how much the major epochs of redemptive history make up much of the subject matter of the Psalter. The impetus of studying Psalm 136 for this exegesis paper was my fascination with Psalms that particularly draw on the history of Israel as a significant theme for its worship. What wonderfully arises as the focus of Psalm 136 is God’s unceasing covenant mercy throughout the nation’s history, as exhibited by such a refrain at the end of every one of its twenty-six verses (which itself is a unique feature of the Psalm). This unusual “antiphonal” structure, along with the opening and closing verses calling God’s people to thank or praise Him for His unending covenant mercy which are illustrated through several highlighted sections of redemptive-historical events, has led to Psalm 136 being referred to as the Great Hallel.

History and Author

Unlike many of the Psalms, the author and situation of Psalm 136 are not stated. Its placement toward the end of the Psalter could indicate a non-Davidic writing sometime after the monarchy. However, the fact that the Psalm speaks with details and specifics about Egyptian deliverance and the conquest of the Transjordan territories and through the defeat of kings Sihon and Og,

while closing in generalities about Israel being remembered in their affliction and redeemed from their enemies, could suggest an earlier date before the monarchy. When dating the book of Acts, it is taken into account about where the history leaves off with specific events. It could be that the lack of specifics at verses twenty-three and twenty-four about remembering them in their low estate and redeeming them from their enemies indicate that the date of the writing was some time before the monarchy, perhaps before the completion of events within the book of Judges. Jacob Bazak assumes a “present miracle”¹ in verses 23 to 26 that would suggest at least the situation of the Psalm as within the contemporary time of being remembered and redeemed, but this could still fit anywhere in the experiences of Judges through Nehemiah. Dirk J. Human says that “ ... several indicators in the Psalm suggest a post-exilic date for its final composition ... ”², although he is unclear as to what they are.

The Jewish Virtual Library provides some historical background for this Psalm:

The term *Hallel ha-Gadol* (“Great *Hallel*”) refers only to Psalm 136 (Tosef. Ta’an. 3:5) which is recited during Pesukei de-Zimra at the morning service on Sabbaths and on festivals (Tos. to Ta’an 26a). It is the daily psalm on the last day of Passover (Sof. 18:2), and is added to the *seder Hallel* (Pes. 118a; TJ, Pes. 5:7, 32c). According to the Mishnah (Ta’an 3:9), this psalm was sung on joyous communal occasions, e.g., the long-awaited rain after a period of severe drought.³

Ultimately, other than some time after the specific events detailed up unto the inheritance of the Promised Land, it is not possible to date the Psalm’s origin. There is an effective aspect of moving into a general comment on being redeemed as a people at this point: it naturally allows for application of it to any specific time in the life of God’s people throughout its history, including today.

¹ Jacob Bazak, “The Geometric-Figurative Structure of Psalm CXXXVI,” *Vetus Testamentum* 35, no. 2 (April 1985) : 130. He also says of the section on page 137 that it “concludes the psalm and it seems that in it the actual event is mentioned that gave rise to the composition of this psalm: ‘has delivered us from our adversaries’.”

² Dirk J. Human, article on liturgy, 78.

³ www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org, May 4, 2010.

Focus of Paper

In this paper, I will first provide a structural breakdown of the Psalm using the King James Version (KJV) to help identify its main sections and thus its main topics and how they work with the refrain as its obvious theme; this will include providing a suggested exegetical point as trained by RPTS Professor Dr. Dennis Prutow’s hermeneutic and homiletic classes, which will serve well for the sermon outline required for the end of this assignment as well as a helpful reference of the whole while analyzing its components and syntax. Next, I will provide my own verse-by-verse translation of the text, with analysis of key words, phrases, and subjects that have redemptive-historical significance, relevant morphology and grammar parsing, and an interaction with commentators throughout each section along with the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*’s Critical Apparatus notes in the verses where they apply. The translations of reference for this paper are the King James Version (KJV), English Standard Version (ESV), New American Standard Bible (NAS), the New International Version (NIV), and the New King James Bible (NKJ). In my own translation, I follow precedent in translating Yahweh as “LORD”, Elohim as “God”, and Adonai as “Lord”; as well, I italicize words in my own translation that are not actually there in the Hebrew but are necessary for coherent English sentences and getting at the Hebrew’s full meaning which English cannot entirely reflect in one word. Finally, I will provide brief theological, propositional, and practical considerations followed by a sermon outline of Psalm 136 based on the exegesis of this paper and the Sermon Preparation Procedure training of Dr. Dennis Prutow.

Structure of Psalm 136:

First I will share my own structural analysis of this hymn-like Psalm⁴, followed by that of others.

1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for *he is* good: for his ¹ mercy
endureth for ever.

Thank God for His goodness.

Synonymous
Parallelism.

² O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy *endureth* for
ever.

Thank God, the only God, Who only does wondrous acts.

⁴ Dirk J. Human, “A Liturgy with Reference to Creation and History,” in *Psalms and Liturgy*, ed. D. Cas J. A. Vos (London: T&T Clark International, 2004) 78: “Psalm 136 reflects the typical structure of a liturgy.”

Synthetic Parallelism.

³ O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
⁴ To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Synonymous Parallelism.

Synthetic Parallelism.

Synonymous Parallelism.

⁵ To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
⁶ To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his ¹ mercy *endureth* for ever.
⁷ To him that made great lights: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
⁸ The sun to rule by day: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
⁹ The moon and stars to rule by night: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Wonders of Creation, following order of Genesis.

Synthetic Parallelism.

Synonymous Parallelism.

Synthetic Parallelism.

¹⁰ To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
¹¹ And ¹ brought out Israel from among them: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
¹² With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.
¹³ To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
¹⁴ And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
¹⁵ But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Wonders of Egyptian Deliverance, following order of Exodus.

Transition

¹⁶ To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Synonymous parallelism.

Synthetic parallelism.

Synonymous parallelism.

¹⁷ To him which smote great kings: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
¹⁸ And slew ¹ famous kings: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
¹⁹ Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:
²⁰ And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:

Wonders of Provision of the nation through the wilderness into the Transjordan, following Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Synonymous parallelism.

²¹ And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy *endureth* for

Wonders of Providing the Nation a Land of Inheritance, following Joshua.

ever:

→²² *Even* an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Synthetic parallelism.

→²³ Who remembered us in our ¹ low estate: for his mercy *endureth* for ever:

→²⁴ And hath redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Wonders of Covenantal faithfulness and further deliverance, following Judges – Nehemiah?

²⁵ Who giveth food to all ¹ flesh: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Wonders of provision to all creatures.

²⁶ O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy *endureth* for ever.

Thank the only God in heaven.

Subject of Psalm 136 (What is the text about?): Thanking the only God who rules over the universe on behalf of His people with wondrous acts of creation, national deliverance from Egypt, national provision through the wilderness, national conquest of the Promised Land, national redemption after punishment, and general provision for all creatures.

Compliment of the Subject (What is the text saying about its subject?): Thank Him for His good and everlasting covenant mercy.

Exegetical Point of Psalm 136: The Psalmist calls us to give thanks to the only God Who rules over the universe through His wondrous acts of creation and general providence, and in particular, Who personally involves Himself with Israel’s history of national deliverance, provision, conquest, and redemption, all because of His good and unceasing covenant mercy to them.

Jacob Bazak gives the following structural observations:

Ps. cxxxvi is probably one of the very few psalms that have been retained in the same way as it was performed in the course of worship in ancient Israel. The

refrain “For his grace endures for ever” was most probably sung by the congregation as a response to the singing of the first half of each of the verses by the leader. In Jewish tradition this psalm is known as the Great Hallel. The reason for this title may be that the refrain is repeated here twenty-six times, whereas in the group of Pss. cxiii-cxviii, also known in Jewish tradition as Hallel, the same refrain is repeated only four times (csvgii1-4).⁵

This brings up the consideration of whether Psalm 136 was sung as an antiphony with the refrain at the end of each of its twenty-six verses, “For his mercy endures forever,” given as the response to give thanks and the reason that God does what He does for Israel. Westermann says that “... such antiphonal dialog at worship presupposes, as far as we know, an activity (stylized as it may be): the confrontation of two groups, or of a liturgist and a congregation—summons and response to a summons ... the liturgical action is always merely alluded to.”⁶ Dirk J. Human recognizes that “the first half of every verse alternates with an antiphonal refrain in the second part of the verse.”⁷ Jörg Jeremias concurs: “Psalm 136:3 is a litany; the congregation answers the different sections of the poem with a refrain.”⁸

The way the Masoretic text is laid out—with each refrain on the other side of the page from the first section of each verse (“left justified”, if you will), compared to the rest of the psalm’s visible structure, suggests an antiphonal use. It seems to be the case when it is used in the book of Ezra:

Ezra 3:10-11 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. ¹¹ **And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because *he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel***
...

The words “by course” rendered in the KJV to qualify how they sang are interpreted as

⁵ Bazak, 129.

⁶ Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), 101.

⁷ Human, 73-74.

⁸ Jörg Jeremias, “Worship and Theology in the Psalms,” in *Psalms and Liturgy*, ed. Dirk J. Human and Cas J. A. Vos (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 93.

“responsively” by the ESV and NKJ. The NAU and NIV seem to decide against the idea of reciprocal response, which reads in Hebrew: וַיַּעֲנֵנוּ בְהַלֵּל וּבְהוֹדוֹת לַיהוָה, and could be translated either way with the Qal form of עָנָה, but the idea of responding seems to be the more common lexical treating of the word. The word עָנָה is clearly the main verb, as the next two verbs are joined together as Hiphil infinitive verbs. Thus it could be rendered, “And they responded in praising and thanking the LORD.”

It seems inconclusive to demand an antiphonal concept of the people responding to the priests, although the structure of Psalm 136 in the Hebrew would favor such an idea. The verb could simply be referring to what the priests, Levites, and sons of Asaph who have set up to praise at the foundation of the temple in verse ten of Ezra 3 are now doing in verse eleven. But the verb עָנָה seems to usually have the idea of answering or responding, as does the context of the people coming together and joining in worship—responding to the leading of the priests. Also, the structure of Psalm 136, especially in the Hebrew layout, is uniquely suited to a call and response. I favor seeing both the event in Ezra as well as Psalm 136 as antiphonal singing. There is other precedence in the Psalms for such a conclusion. Psalm 118, which begins and ends exactly as Psalm 136 does, calls out to different groups of people to respond: verse two, “Let Israel now say”; verse three, “Let the house of Aaron now say”; verse four, “Let them now that fear the Lord say”; and they are all to say the same refrain as Psalm 136, “That his mercy endureth forever.”

While Hebrew employs many parallel language tools, especially in poetry, it is a unique feature of Psalm 136 to have such repetition of words, especially the exact same refrain. Psalm 24 has some of this exact repetition with “Who is this King of Glory?” and the answer that follows, as do Psalms 42 and 43, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul?” But nothing comes close to this repetitive refrain in every of twenty-six verses of Psalm 136. This would suggest that Psalm 136

can shed great light on the main nature of חֶסֶד, *hesed*, “mercy”.⁹ Also, as Jesus says not to engage in vain repetitions, the importance of God’s *hesed* is emphasized by this unusual repetition that extols its unending nature to His chosen people. All in all, “... this magnificent praise known as ‘The Great Hallel’ – the everlasting mercy of God to His people is as repetitious in history as it is in this psalm.”¹⁰

Translation of the Hebrew:

I prefer to offer a rather wooden translation for such an assignment so as to lay before us the nuances and emphases of its word order, especially keeping in mind the fact that it was written to be sung in Hebrew poetry. I do not submit this translation as something that would be for use in more general public consumption. What follows below for a translation is not intended to be polished.

Psalm 136

Verse 1

הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה

Give thanks to the LORD.

The word הוֹדוּ in the Hiphil form of the verb can be translated “give thanks” or “praise” or “laud”. It has the idea of actively causing someone to be honored, especially in ritual worship. We should not miss the Qal form of the verb to help inform the full idea of giving thanks; that is, the idea of casting, throwing, or shooting arrows. The point being that there is a definite object of impact in view. So the Hiphil form of the verb, having a causative sense, along with it being

⁹ It is surprising, almost shocking, that of the three major books used in this paper on the meaning of *hesed* in the Old Testament, two do not once address or allude to Psalm 136, and one has a very brief use of it, but no focus on it. The one place in the Scripture where *hesed* is the dominant theme as a refrain in all of its twenty-six verses by which all of them are categorized and for which all of them serve, Psalm 136 should receive significant attention in any serious study of *hesed*.

¹⁰ C. J. Williams, *Repetitious Mercy*, a one-page sermon outline on Psalm 136. This was shared with me by Rev. Williams in May of 2010, Professor of Old Testament Studies for the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, PA, during review of preparation for this paper for his Hebrew Exegesis class.

in the imperative, is emphatic in nature and has someone or something specific in view. And the One specific in view to cause to be thanked, praised, or lauded is Yahweh, our personal, covenant God.

כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ:

For *He* is good, for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

No translation to my knowledge diverges from the standard rendering of, “For he is good”. But there is no “he” in the Hebrew, and the grammatical structure could seem to more naturally have the only subject being, “His mercy”. The first use of “for”, כִּי before and connected by the “good”, טוֹב, along with the similar second use of “for”, כִּי before לְעוֹלָם “to eternity” or “for eternity”, might seem to naturally link “good” and “eternal” as adjectives of the noun, “mercy”. However, the refrain that follows each verse of the Psalm does not say “good and eternal is his mercy”, but rather “eternal (or unceasing) is his mercy”. No doubt that God’s goodness is in view throughout the Psalm, and especially at the beginning and end as Creator and Provider, but the grammar of this sentence could seem to be focusing on God’s goodness as exhibited through His good and eternal mercy. This is not such a stretch, considering every verse of the Psalm is clearly extolling God’s mercy as the subject and impetus for praising Him. With this translation in view for now, while smooth English prose for this rendering might read, “For good and eternal is His covenant mercy”, I first rendered it “For good, for unceasing *is* His covenant mercy”, leaving out the *lamed* before *‘olam* and adding “is” before “His” to try and render it close to the Hebrew and maintain what might be a meter or rhythm of how it might have been sung. Even in English, this form could provide a more effective rhythm of singing it this way, with a sense of a pause before the second “for”, and repetition that emphasizes both the good and eternal quality of God’s mercy as the impetus of our thanksgiving in worship. And this “stutter-step” in the Hebrew of “for good, for unceasing” is characteristic of poetry.

However, here is where an interesting aspect of the printed layout of the Masoretic Text trumps my potential innovation. The same layout of the “for his mercy endures forever” all being “left justified” at the end of every verse, including the first verse, makes it obvious that the phrase in verse one “for his mercy endureth forever” is intended to fall in line with the rest of the lines of verse as a visual parallel, and as stated above, likely to be used antiphonally. Verse one, if translated “For good and eternal is His covenant mercy”, with “good” qualifying “mercy” rather than qualifying “He is” (supplied in English by all translations) would in this case stand out visually as awkwardly as someone singing a line out of time in the congregation while the rest of the people paused if the layout of the Hebrew were to be rendered in English. Visually in the Masoretic Text, it is obvious that I should supply the “He is” and attach it to “good” as every translation does, rather than attach it to “mercy” as its object, and keep the refrains consistent. With further study of Hebrew style, this is common. For instance: **וּ מִיְהוָה וְאִישׁ מִזִּמּוֹת יִרְשָׁעִים:** **טוֹב יַפְיֵךְ רָצוֹ** “A good *man* obtaineth favour of the LORD: but a man of wicked devices will he condemn” (Proverbs 12:2). The word “man” here is supplied; in the Hebrew, it just says “good”. But “man” is understood (see also Proverbs 13:22). Similarly, **לִיהוָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ** **הַלְלוּהוּ הוֹדוּ** “Praise ye the LORD. O give thanks unto the LORD; for *he is* good: for his mercy *endureth* for ever” (Psalm 106:1). Here, in a similar phrase, “he is” is supplied in the English (see also Psalm 107:1; 118:1, 29). This is a good example of the importance of reading the original languages regularly to understand their natural style of usage – just the Jehovah’s Witness should not conclude that Jesus is not God because there is no article supplied in the Greek in John 1 (thanks to Dr. Jack Kinneer at RPTS for this insight). It also is a good example of why it is worth consulting the Masoretic Text in print for visual cues of layout (although Psalm 136 is unique in having its refrain “left justified”) and not rely only on electronic versions of Hebrew such as Bible Works, which cannot replicate the actual visual layout on the page.

This section of verse one warrants a great amount of further consideration. First, and most obviously, because **לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ** is the refrain of every verse. And it is a phrase used elsewhere at important times in Israel’s history:

These 26 proofs of God’s mercy ... form the brief preface to the everlasting continuance of His covenantal love in which His people stand in every generation. This is always a “new song” on the lips of God’s people as His mercy unfolds in time and history adds more proof of His love. This psalm was sung with this realization when the ark was brought into the temple (2 Chron 5:13), when Jehoshaphat won in battle (2 Chron 20:21), when the foundation was laid for the second temple (Ezra 3:11), and when Athanasius and his congregation escaped from Rome’s praetorians (358 A.D.) ... His mercy still endures to us. The greatest proof of it is the broken body and shed blood of the Lord of lords, Jesus Christ.¹¹

And so, “The verse that opens the 136th Psalm, and then becomes the refrain that is sung over and over, is a typical example of the way that praise and thanksgiving work ... This verse is not only a typical example. It has become the mode of praise in the Bible. We hear it again and again in the psalms and elsewhere.”¹²

Second, and equally important, עולם (*‘olam*) and חֶסֶד (*ḥesed*) are Hebrew words pregnant with shades of meaning that the English cannot fully communicate in a one-word equivalent. In particular, *ḥesed* is a very important covenantal word that is the linking theme and defining choice of each of the main parts of Psalm 136; but first, its unceasing aspect.

Eternal, Infinite, Perpetual

I am tempted to translate לעולם “to all eternity”, but the “all” is not technically there. To keep the flow of the word order, with mercy at the end, it would read awkward as “for for forever is His mercy” in English. The word “eternity” is feasible; while קָדָם is used for “eternal” or “everlasting”, and עַד is normally used for “eternity” in Hebrew, still, עולם has the idea of “eternal” in the following verse:

¹¹Williams.

¹² Patrick D. Miller, “Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26,” *Interpretation* 49, no. 4 (October 1995) : 390.

Isaiah 60:15 Whereas thou hast been forsaken and hated, so that no man went through *thee*, I will make thee an **eternal** excellency, a joy of many generations.

On the verse in Isaiah above, the ESV translates עוֹלָם as “forever”, the NAU and the NIV as “everlasting”, and the NKJ also as “eternal”. The French Bible, in fact, often calls God *l’Eternel*, meaning “Eternal” or “Eternal One.”¹³ We see the word used similarly in Deuteronomy 33:27: “The eternal God *is thy* refuge, and underneath *are* the **everlasting** arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy *them*.” Here, *‘olam* translated as “everlasting” relating to God’s arms to communicate they never tire. And it is parallel with God being referred to as “eternal” using עָדָם as a synonym. So to translate לְעוֹלָם as “to eternity” has merit to keep “mercy” in its Hebrew word order, and possibly its intended emphasis.

William Holladay lists עוֹלָם as “long time, constancy, all (coming) time (in [English] [usually] ‘eternity,’ ‘eternal,’ but not to be understood in [a] philosophical sense).”¹⁴ *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says that *‘olam* “... assumes the meaning ‘(unlimited, incalculable) continuance, eternity.”¹⁵ Perpetuity is another word suggested that I think gets at the sense of its use in Psalm 136.¹⁶ Eric C. Rust explains that “The Hebrew view of time we shall find to be realistic and existential ... In Hebrew thought the emphasis falls upon the concrete content of time, and not upon its chronological measure. Hours, days, months, and years are defined not by anything so abstract as a time scale, but by the stuff that fills them and makes them significant.”¹⁷ This would seem to fit the context of Psalm 136. Rust continues his position commenting on the word *‘olam* as “representing the idea of ‘eternity’ in Old Testament

¹³ William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God’s Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 11.

¹⁴ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 267.

¹⁵ R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, *Nun-Taw* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 672, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 673.

¹⁷ Eric C. Rust, “Time and Eternity in Biblical Thought,” *Theology Today* 10, no. 3 (October 1953) : 328-9.

thought”¹⁸ that:

The very belief in God’s intervention in history, that our times are truly his, that all history is overruled by him and brought to a focus in the past time of deliverance at the Exodus and the future time of the consummation of his sovereign will—all this suggests that God requires time for the fulfillment of his plans, that time has meaning for him and that his eternity cannot be the total negation of time. The most significant word in this connection is ‘*olam*.¹⁹

Further, Rust says that ‘*olam* carries the “sense of permanence” and “indicates an unchangeable condition”²⁰. As well, “‘*olam* carries with it the sense of what endures through the ages or ‘generations.’ History consists of the ‘generations,’ each defined in a specific way, but ‘*olam* is that which lasts through them ... Eternity is thus like the whole that is greater than its parts ... there is a permanence in God which persists behind the changes of our temporal existence.”²¹

Raphael Loewe concurs that

God’s agelessness is brought out by עולם-phrases in connection with His manifestations and attributes ... since Hebrew never makes time abstract, eternity is conceived as a piling up of limited time periods ... in the Old Testament thought time and eternity are not contrasted, eternity being the remoteness of time; but a growing difference of quality is reached through a transcendence of time in religious experience.²²

Citing H. Sasse, Loewe also notes that “עולם when used in connection with propositions,” including ל, such as in the refrain of Psalm 136, indicates “continuing time”.²³ While citing Brown, Driver, and Briggs’ *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, John C. Jeske notes that “... עולם is not always to be translated ‘forever’ ...”, and he favors the lexicon’s

¹⁸ Ibid, 336.

¹⁹ Ibid, 338-9.

²⁰ Ibid, 339.

²¹ Ibid, 340-1.

²² Raphael Loewe, “Jerome’s Rendering of עולם,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 (1949) : 266-267.

²³ Ibid, 267.

second listed meaning: “The predominant use of עולם in the Old Testament is to indicate ... indefinite futurity ... God’s love, his power, and his truth reach back into eternity past and extend into eternity future.”²⁴

Brian Long suggests of the word *‘olam* that,

... not only is unlimited time not referred to, but that time in general is not in the foreground ... Rather than referring to duration of time, it is suggested that עולם refers to the certainty or surety of a state or action. ‘Perpetual’, which is sometimes used for עולם, is closer to this sense. Rather than perpetual ‘forever’, though, the sense is ‘unchangeable’, certain and established ... The only independent sense of עולם is the one which draws attention to surety or unchangeability – the word is not independent as regards duration, but conforms itself to the contextual duration.²⁵

It might be just as well to translate “eternal” as “infinite”, as *‘olam* is a rich Hebrew word that involves more than the lack of an eclipse of time. “Enduring forever” might be a good choice, using two words. It is neither spatial nor temporal, but both. It includes past, present, and future. It is not restricted to time, and emphasizes quality. The context of Psalm 136 clearly has in mind the unchanging character of God, that of His unending mercy through the events of Israel’s life. His mercy is infinite, as it is based in Himself as expressed in His covenant with Abraham. Thus, to say that God’s mercy is לעולם “to all eternity”, as it is based in Himself, is to express the unconditionality of God’s *hesed* to His covenant people. Considering the various aspects of *‘olam*, I choose to try and capture the nuance of it as “unceasing” in this Psalm, similar to the choice by some of “everlasting” or “enduring”, but hopefully having less of a sense of an exact beginning into the future that doesn’t include the past, while intimating an ever perpetual present reality.

²⁴ John C. Jeske, “Exegetical Brief: ער-עולם ‘Forever’,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (Spring 2002) : 138-139.

²⁵ Brian Long, “Notes on the Biblical Use of ער-עולם,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 41, no. 1 (Fall 1978) : 56.

Covenant Mercy

The word for mercy (KJV), **חֶסֶד**, is a very important word because of its covenantal significance. In his book, *Hesed and Hasid In the Psalms*, Dom Rembert Sorg says that “Hesed is one of the great words of the Hebrew language, which defies translation in Western Tongues and it is characteristically psalmistic.”²⁶ He notes that *hesed* is used in the Psalms 128 times, more than the whole of the rest of the Old Testament (121 times), while its derivative *Hasid* (godly ones) is used 25 times in the Psalms, and only seven times in the rest of the Old Testament; thus “We infer therefrom that it is strictly a DIVINE predicate. When applied to men, it is a Divine likeness.”²⁷ Gordon R. Clark notes that “Three out of every four occurrences of **חֶסֶד** are with God as agent.”²⁸ He explains:

The use of the word in the Hebrew Bible indicates that **חֶסֶד** is characteristic of God rather than human beings; it is rooted in the divine nature, and it is expressed because of who he is ... Yahweh’s tenacious commitment to Israel even in the face of their blatant and persistent rebellion demonstrates that **חֶסֶד** is an enduring quality of God.²⁹

Based on his study, Sorg summarizes that the Psalms use of *hesed* demonstrates seven divine attributes: Eternal[ity], Fidelity, Immensity, Fullness, Beneficence/Salvation, Humility, and Power/Justice.³⁰ He concludes, “The more specific ‘lovingkindness’ seems to be preferred in the best English translations.”³¹

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes that, “For centuries the word *hesed* was

²⁶ Dom Rembert Sorg, *Hesed and Hasid in the Psalms: A story of the marvelous relation between God and the blessed ones of His election and love* (St. Louis: Pio Decimo Press, 1953) , 9.

²⁷ Sorg, 11, 12.

²⁸ Gordon R. Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) , 262.

²⁹ Ibid, 267.

³⁰ Sorg, 15-19.

³¹ Ibid, 10.

translated with words like mercy, kindness, love. The LXX usually uses *eleos* ‘mercy’ ...”³² James A. Montgomery suggests: “For expression of *hesed* in English ‘kindness’ might be the best representative, as signifying the moral obligation along with or even beyond the law.”³³

Katharin Doob Sakenfeld, in her book *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, says that “The theological use of *hesed* ... centers on this attitude of persistent faithfulness ...”³⁴ and that “... the term remains rooted in Israel’s recognition of particular acts of deliverance of the helpless as manifestations of God’s *hesed*.”³⁵ Further, it is “... God’s faithfulness given expression as protection, deliverance, or forgiveness ... God’s *hesed* is the providential exercise of his power on behalf of the needy people with whom he has established a special relationship.”³⁶ It is “... a single word [that] expressed the utter dependence of the people upon Yahweh and his willingness and ability to deliver them.”³⁷

Clark shares the following observations after his self-described structural “lexical field” study (including observing how a word applies to groups of lexical items that regularly or habitually occur together statistically³⁸) of חֶסֶד:

1. שֵׁנָא is remote from חֶסֶד;
2. חֶסֶד is closely related to חֲנּוּן; it includes ‘grace’ and ‘mercy’, but it is much more than grace and mercy;
3. חֶסֶד is close to רַחֲמִים; it includes ‘compassion’, but it is not merely compassion;

³² R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Aleph-Mem* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 305.

³³ James A. Montgomery, “Hebrew *Hesed* and Greek *Charis*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 32, no. 2 (April 1939):101.

³⁴ Katharin Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1978), 128.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 163.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 230-1.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 238.

³⁸ Clark, 78: He calls this process “collocation”.

4. חֶסֶד is close to אֱמוּנָה; it includes ‘faithfulness’, ‘reliability’, ‘confidence’, but it is not merely faithfulness, reliability, confidence;
5. חֶסֶד is not very close to אָהָב; while it includes ‘love’, its connotations are much broader than those of love.³⁹

Nelson Gleuck’s book, *Hesed in the Bible*, has been treated as the authoritative modern work on *hesed*. He says that the term “... is received or shown only by those among whom a definite relationship exists,”⁴⁰ and supplies a list of the various *hesed* relationships:

- A. Relatives by blood or marriage, related clans and related tribes.
- B. Host and guest.
- C. Allies and their relatives.
- D. Friends.
- E. Ruler and subject.
- F. Those who have gained merit by rendering aid, and the parties thereby put under obligation.⁴¹

Glueck argues that “... *hesed* can be practiced only between persons who share an ethically binding relationship ... [it] constitutes the essence of a covenant.”⁴²

Thus according to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, “the *hesed* of God ... can be called covenant *hesed* without contradiction ... the covenant is the sign and expression of his love.”⁴³ And while its editors argue that God “... was in covenant relation with Israel, also that he expressed this relation in *hesed*,” yet it challenges that “it is by no means clear that *hesed* necessarily involves a covenant or means fidelity to a covenant.”⁴⁴ Sakenfeld also wants to emphasize unconditional relationship and de-emphasize the necessity of a formal covenantal

³⁹ Ibid, 267-8.

⁴⁰ Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1975) , 37.

⁴¹ Ibid, 37.

⁴² Ibid, 37, 54.

⁴³ Harris, vol. 1, 306.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 307.

relationship within the word *ḥesed*. Similarly, Gordon R. Clark argues that *ḥesed* is “not to be confined to a bipartisan relationship that depends on a formal agreement, בְּרִית, between two parties. The expression of חֶסֶד is appropriate to, and is often based in a deep, enduring, persistent commitment of each party to the other.”⁴⁵ I fail to see how this last sentence of Clark’s is something other than a distinction without a difference. A covenant *is* a deep, enduring, persistent commitment of each party to the other. I think Glueck adequately disclaims the aspects of *ḥesed* being the motive for a covenant [*berith*] and the expression of it, and clearly understands the difference between covenants among men and the suzerain aspect of God to man: “*Hesed* is the premise and effect of a [*berith*]; it constitutes the very essence of a [*berith*] ... there can be no [*berith*] without *ḥesed* ... *Hesed* was the content of every [*berith*] as well as every covenantal relationship ... *Hesed* is contained in [*berith*].”⁴⁶ I think he also best understands the enhanced beauty of a relationship formally attested to with binding loyalty through a covenant, such as marriage, which not all less formal relationships enjoy.

Commenting on Psalm 136, Glueck writes:

While the *ḥesed* relationship between Yahweh and his people was regarded as having originated through his goodness, *ḥesed* itself remained the mutual relationship of rights and duties which Yahweh had obligated himself to show. In this sense only is *ḥesed* to be understood; for example, Ps. 136:10, at the end of the verse ... He stood by the people of his covenant, faithfully executing *ḥesed* to which they were entitled by virtue of that relationship ... [it] is best translated in these stereo-typed passages as ‘covenantal loyalty’ or ‘faithful assistance according to the covenant.’⁴⁷

I think it is important to clarify Glueck’s last phrase by noting that God’s people are entitled to *ḥesed* by virtue of that relationship because of the Covenant of Grace to the invisible church and the Abrahamic Covenant for the visible church. Glueck obviously understands this by

⁴⁵ Clark, 140.

⁴⁶ Glueck, 68, 73-4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

emphasizing that *ḥesed* precedes and flows from a covenant relationship. And as it is bestowed on Israel, *ḥesed* is “... His covenant-based conduct.”⁴⁸ Thus, “The pious clung to God with unshakable confidence, and they praised Him with thankful hearts for *ḥesed*, either already granted or in certainty expected. Through *ḥesed*, the most valuable good of all was characterized, namely—the covenantal relationship with God.”⁴⁹ Holladay notes that *ḥesed* is “obligation to the community” in filial and economic relations, and highlights “loyalty” and “faithfulness” in such relations, as well as that “a [berit] is initiated by ceremony, *ḥesed* results [from] closer relation [between] parties, but the obligations are largely the same.”⁵⁰ When *ḥesed* is “in relation of God to people or individuals,” it is “**faithfulness, kindness, grace.**”⁵¹ I have chosen to translate it as “covenant mercy” to capture the various aspects described above.

Verse 2

הוֹדוּ לֵאלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶד׃

Give thanks to *the* God of the gods; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

Here is a good example of אֱלֹהִים being used both as singular and referring to the only true God, while also truly as plural for “gods”. It is an interesting juxtaposition of the same word for entirely different subjects. This is typical of the superlative nature of Hebrew, such as the title of another book, the “Song of Songs”. We see the words “God of gods” used similarly in places like Deuteronomy 10:17: “For the LORD your God *is* **God of gods**, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward ...” The context here is an interesting parallel to the theme of Psalm 136. Here, Moses is telling the people to be faithful to their God Who has been faithful to their fathers, and Who is the only God that owns heaven and earth (see verses one through four and verse twenty-six in Psalm 136). There has proven to be no other God, and He has chosen them to serve Him. So the phrase, “God of gods” or “Lord of lords” (which follows in verse three of the Psalm) demonstrates in such a context as

⁴⁸ Ibid, 87.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 98.

⁵⁰ Holladay, 111.

⁵¹ Ibid, 111.

Deuteronomy 10, not that God is one of many gods, but that He is so much higher than any of the false gods. He is the only God over everything. Thus, the Psalm closes in verse twenty-six that He is the “God of heaven”: “In relation to the polytheistic allusions in verses 2-3, the indication that Yahweh performs these deeds alone (לְבַדּוֹ) expresses his unique character in comparison to the other (heavenly) powers of gods.”⁵²

Verse 3

הוֹדוּ לַאֲדֹנָי הָאֲדֹנָיִם כִּי לְעַלְמֵם חַסְדּוֹ:

Give thanks to the Lord of lords; for unceasing is His *covenant* mercy.

Here is a synonymous parallel to verse two with “God of gods”, yet with a nuanced difference. The word “lords” normally represents a contrasting human dominion over a nation or peoples compared to the “Lord of heaven” and His dominion over all peoples, but especially over His particular people and on behalf of them with His dominion over the nations. We see the ruling Philistines referred to as “lords” in 1 Samuel 6 and 29. In Isaiah 26:13, he contrasts the LORD (Yahweh) with other “lords” (אֲדֹנָיִם) who have dominion over them, yet not truly like their LORD. In Jeremiah 2:31, it is questioned how the people of the LORD call themselves “lords” and will no longer come to Him in obedience. Daniel too makes such a contrast with the Lord of heaven and the Babylonian lords when interpreting the writing on the wall of God’s dominion over Belshazzar and his many “lords” with whom he feasted (In Aramaic here; Daniel 5:23). So there is history to this phrase, and it serves as a precedent while often synonymously paralleled in use with “King of kings” speaking of Jesus (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). So we can sing this Psalm and have in mind Christ our Mediator in verses two and three.

It is also worth noting that the use of the name אֲדֹנָי for God here along with יהוה in verse one and אֱלֹהִים in verse two demonstrates that the authors of the Psalms, as well as those in any book of Scripture, exercise freedom and flexibility in style of word usage not only in different Psalms, but within a Psalm itself. This is naturally how anyone writes, especially for variety in poetry.

⁵² Human, 79.

So the notion of those who take for granted that there are Elohim sections to be separated from Yahweh sections of the Psalms as deliberately distinct are misguided. ⁵³

Verse 4

לְעֹשֶׂה נִפְלְאוֹת גְּדֹלוֹת לְבַדּוֹ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ:

To the One Who does wonders great by Himself; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

It is tempting to make “wonders” as being about God as “wonderful” with the Niphal (generally reflexive) construction, but its plural feminine ending obviously matches that of the ending of “great” and not the masculine singular of the opening participle “the one who does” nor the noun “alone” or “only”.

I translate לְבַדּוֹ as “by Himself” because that is the sense of the word especially when connected with the *lamed* preposition (Whittaker Lexicon in Bible Works, 94). The words “by Himself” seem to communicate “of His own doing and without assistance” better than “alone” which does capture this concept adequately, but might inadvertently emphasize solitude more than self-sustaining and singular creative power. While God no doubt created the universe in isolation of anyone else’s existence, and verses five through nine that follow do focus on His wondrous creative acts, this verse seems to also set up as a theme God’s wondrous works of redemption and providence throughout human history, in which He involves Himself. Naturally, He is still utterly above man and His creation, but in terms of the great and wondrous works that this Psalm details in historic sections which involve man and creatures as the recipients, it would seem that God doing these things by Himself – that is, without the aid of His creatures and in contrast to idol gods, is most in view. The context seems to focus not on God’s acting in solitude, but His ultimate independence. This distinction also is why I translate the participial phrase לְעֹשֶׂה as “To the One Who”, in the interest of subtle, yet further emphasis on God as solely self-sufficient in His wondrous acts. The rest of the Psalm sections out these great and wonderful things that

⁵³ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) , 13: “ ... the so-called Elohistic Psalter—at one time must have circulated as a separate hymnbook. This is evident only from the text of the original Hebrew Bible, in which all the psalms show a decided preference to use the general name ‘God’ (Elohim) instead of the special divine name (Yhwh) usually translated ‘LORD’.”

God does: God’s wondrous acts of creation; God’s wondrous acts of delivering His people from Egypt and through the Red Sea; God’s wondrous acts of provision for Israel through the wilderness and the threat of pagan kings; God’s wondrous provision of an inheritance of the Promised Land; God’s wondrous redemption from further oppression; and God’s wondrous provision to all His creatures under His heavenly jurisdiction—all as testimony to His good and enduring covenant mercy.

The Critical Apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) notes that גְּדֻלוֹת is omitted from a version (2017) of the Septuagint as well as sahidic and Old Latin versions.⁵⁴ There is no reason to omit it in the translation from the Masoretic Text (MT), reflected also in the Septuagint. The poetic language warrants superlatives, especially with what the Psalm features throughout. As well, the BHS notes that some medieval Hebrew manuscripts are missing לְבָרָךְ, but this fact also is not very pertinent to the MT and it should remain reflected in translation.

Verse 5

לְעִשָּׂה הַשָּׁמַיִם בְּתִבּוּנָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדְךָ:

To the One Who makes the heavens by understanding; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

The Psalmist highlights the means of God’s creating—not by chance, spontaneous combustion, or a discharge of His own substance, but by understanding. By His own infinite intelligence, which we reflect as His image when we make things, especially by those who are craftsmen. For example:

Exodus 35:31 And he hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in **understanding**, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship ...

Notice here that Bezalel “by understanding”, בְּתִבּוּנָה, (used also speaking of Oholiab in a similar context in chapter 36) is able to design and craft many intricate, ornate things of beauty for the tabernacle; that is, to create, in a sense, something out of nothing, albeit the material world being

⁵⁴ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 1215.

already in existence by God's creating truly out of nothing. This idea of "understanding" related to God's creative works comes up other places.

Proverbs 3:19 The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by **understanding** hath he established the heavens.

This is the same word used for what God bestowed to Solomon:

1 Kings 4:29 And God gave Solomon wisdom and **understanding** exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that *is* on the sea shore.

Such understanding then, is discernment—purposeful planning that leads to purposeful execution. It is self-reflective, and God is obviously such especially in His essence. So it should be no surprise that the contrast logically follows:

Proverbs 18:2 A fool hath no delight in **understanding**, but that his heart may discover itself.

In particular, as a full exegesis of the text will reckon an implicit juxtaposition of Israel's true God with the dumb idols that the nation constantly needed to be redeemed from when they lacked understanding, God is alive and intelligent. Thus we sing elsewhere:

Psalms 115:1-9 Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, *and* for thy truth's sake. ² Wherefore should the heathen say, Where *is* now their God? ³ But our God *is* in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. ⁴ Their idols *are* silver and gold, the work of men's hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: ⁶ They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: ⁷ They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. ⁸ They that make them are like unto them; *so is* every one that trusteth in them. ⁹ O Israel, trust thou in the LORD: he *is* their help and their shield.

As well, Jesus is our life and logos. He created with a deliberate mind to do so, and exactly as He willed. Creation was no act of chance, but the wondrous and intelligent act of the only Creator.

Verse 6

לְרַקַּע הָאָרֶץ עַל־הַמַּיִם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ:

To the One Who fashioned the earth above the waters; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

The particle רַקַּע has been translated “spread out” (ESV, NAU, NIV), “stretched out” (KJV), or “laid out” (NKJ) by most English translations, all having the same basic meaning. However, this translation would seem to reflect the Piel or Hiphil forms of the verb, while the participle is in the Qal form, which lexicons render “stamped” or “beaten out”.

I favor coming closer to the Qal here and have chosen to translate it “fashioned”, which I deem also to better form with the “understanding” behind the creative act of God in verse five; it more visually shows creative thinking and design. This is not highly significant; for instance, most translations are fairly consistent in translating the Qal participle of this word as “stretched out” or “spread forth”, such as:

Isaiah 42:5 Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that **spread forth** the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

While I have no vital reason to veer away from what the translations go with, and “spreading forth” the earth naturally does parallel the language of “stretching out” the heavens (the Qal form of נָטָה here being more commonly the word for stretching or spreading out something, often, pitching a tent) per the above citation, I yet prefer “fashioned” as a legitimate rendering that works nicely for the flow of thought from the preceding verse. While “spreading” or “stretching” certainly communicates the vastness of creation better than “fashioned” does, spreading the earth over the waters is not as familiar a concept as is fashioning in my mind for the context of Psalm 136, its greater Scriptural context notwithstanding. In addition, Genesis 1:9-10 describes the waters being drawn together so that dry land may appear from the waters (not stretched out over them), so translating it here as “fashioned” seems to be a better overlay with the Genesis account and what comes before in verse five of the Psalm.

Verse 7

לְעֵשָׂה אֲוִרִים גְּדֹלִים כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדְךָ:

To the One Who made lights great; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

It is interesting that the plural word for “lights”, אֲוִרִים, is not the exact usage in Genesis 1:14, although it clearly has this text in mind having just followed the order of Genesis 1:9-10 about the earth and the waters. In Genesis 14, what is consistently translated “lights” is actually מְאֹרֹת, the plural form of מְאֹר, a luminary, and in the context of Genesis to rule the day and night, obviously what the Psalm has in mind with what will follow about the purpose of these lights (the sun to rule by day and the moon to rule by night). Not highly significant, but one might expect language right out of Genesis with the obvious allusion and consistent order of events; still, this demonstrates the flexibility of language usage and style in the Scriptures, as in our own language usage.

Verse 8

אֶת־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ לְמִזְמוֹשֶׁלֶת בַּיּוֹם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדְךָ:

The sun to rule by day; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

While I choose to stay with “by day”, the ESV has a nice, subtle nuance of translating it “over the day”; this requires slight dynamic interpretation, but captures a helpful visual of how we see the sun rule by day – that is, above, or over us from its rising to its setting, and would nicely parallel the figurative expressions of Psalm 19.

Verse 9

אֶת־הַיָּרֵחַ וְכּוֹכְבַיִם לְמִזְמוֹשֶׁלוֹת בַּלַּיְלָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדְךָ:

The moon and stars to rule by night; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

Similarly, the ESV’s rendering of the moon and stars ruling “over” the night is a helpful visual cue. It should be of no alarm that the Psalmist credits the stars along with the moon as ruling over the night, while the Genesis account only mentions the moon. This is not contradictory, and

the moon would seem to be accompanied by the stars in the dark sky while the sun has no companion. There is flexibility in style and focus in the Bible, and we should remember the text in the Psalm is poetically superlative in nature, not strictly narrative. There is no reason to follow the BHS note to probably delete the word, nor should anything be done about its note that some medieval Hebrew manuscripts have a different form of an ending for למְּשֻׁלוֹת.⁵⁵

Verse 10

לְמַכָּה מִצְרַיִם בְּבְכוֹרֵיהֶם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסִדּוֹ:

To the One Who smote Egypt in their firstborn; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

The opening prepositional participle is the Hiphil of נָכָה, meaning to cause to be smitten: to smite. God is the one Who by Himself smote the Egyptians, and He did so through their seed, their firstborn sons (the noun for firstborn is common third person masculine plural construct). It was the final blow to Pharaoh that caused him to let God's people go. There is no more exacting weapon than taking out one's progeny, especially the ones who carry the seed. Further, Exodus chapter twelve narrates that it was Yahweh *Himself* that killed the firstborn sons of the Egyptians at night. So there is precedent and reference for the desire expressed in Psalm 137:8-9, "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy *shall he be*, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy *shall he be*, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."

Verse 11

וַיּוֹצֵא יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסִדּוֹ:

And Who brought out Israel from their midst; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

God's causing Israel to be brought out (וַיּוֹצֵא, the Hiphil verb, vav consecutive imperfect third person masculine singular) from Egypt is for the purpose of bringing them out of the state of slavery in a foreign land and into the land of their own inheritance as their own, special people; this will come to light in verses twenty-one and twenty-two of the Psalm. It is important to

⁵⁵ BHS, 1216.

remember what they are brought out of—Egyptian slavery, as the people are so soon to forget how bad it was and from what they were delivered, even at the hill of Mount Sinai.

Here begins the first recount of a mighty redemptive act of God alone on behalf of His chosen people. It is something that is a constant refrain throughout the Scriptures. First of all, God told Abraham well in advance that this would happen in Genesis 15:13-14. Joseph reiterates this promise to his brothers and instructs them to thus remember to bring his body into the Promised Land when their God rescues them, and Moses did so, as noted in Exodus 13:18. So the Exodus is not only remembered in Scripture, but anticipated by God's revelation in advance that it will happen. Moses institutes the Passover Feast to commemorate this great deed by God in Exodus 12.

This phrase of Egyptian deliverance serves as an important historical time reference for God's people:

Exodus 19:1 In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth **out of the land of Egypt**, the same day came they *into* the wilderness of Sinai.

Numbers 1:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of the congregation, on the first *day* of the second month, in the second year after they were come **out of the land of Egypt**, saying,

Numbers 9:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they were come out **of the land of Egypt**, saying,

Numbers 33:38 And Aaron the priest went up into mount Hor at the commandment of the LORD, and died there, in the fortieth year after the children of Israel were come **out of the land of Egypt**, in the first *day* of the fifth month.

Joshua 5:6 For the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all the people *that were* men of war, which came **out of Egypt**, were consumed, because they obeyed not the voice of the LORD: unto whom the LORD sware that he would not shew them the land, which the LORD sware unto their fathers that he would give us, a land that floweth with milk and honey.

1 Kings 6:1 And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come **out of the land of Egypt**, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Zif, which *is* the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD.

Further, it is a reference point of time at the end of Judges as it relates to good times that the covenant people are not enjoying due to straying from God:

Judges 19:30 And it was so, that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up **out of the land of Egypt** unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak *your minds*.

And there are times when it is a referent in prophecies of restoration:

Hosea 2:15 And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up **out of the land of Egypt**.

Micah 7:15 According to the days of thy coming **out of the land of Egypt** will I shew unto him marvellous *things*.

Zechariah 10:10 I will bring them again also **out of the land of Egypt**, and gather them out of Assyria; and I will bring them into the land of Gilead and Lebanon; and *place* shall not be found for them.

Being brought out of Egypt obviously is very important to God as the people's reference point about who they are and who they are becoming by His hand, as He prefaces the Ten Commandments with the phrase:

Exodus 20:1-2 And God spake all these words, saying, I *am* the LORD thy God, which have brought thee **out of the land of Egypt**, out of the house of bondage. [This is said again in Deuteronomy 5:6 with the reiteration of the Law after defeating Sihon and Og who are also referenced in Psalm 136 in subsequent verses of this section].

In this light, it is helpful to remember the *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* instruction in the answer to question forty-four, "What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?": "The preface to the ten commandments teacheth us, that ... God is the Lord, and our God ..."

The phrase, “out of the land of Egypt,” also is identified with God being known to be Israel’s God when initiating the ordination of priests at the end of Exodus 29. Sadly, when Moses is delayed on the mountain with God in Exodus 32, the people say it is he that brought them up “out of the land of Egypt”, and then ask for gods to be made for them to worship as their deliverers who brought them up “out of the land of Egypt.” God condemns them before Moses on the mountain for crediting Moses and the golden calf for bringing them out of Egypt, and Moses’ appeal to God to forgive and still lead them is that it was God Who in fact “brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

God continues to identify Himself when giving His laws and worship regulations to His delivered people as the LORD, that “brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 11:45; 19:36; 22:33; 23:41; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13, 45; Numbers 15:28; Deuteronomy 16:3). The Israelites begin to be known as a people who “come out of the land of Egypt” as they advance toward and into the Promised Land, while often referencing their God (Numbers 22:5; Numbers 26:4; 32:9; 33:1; Judges 11:13).

Particularly noteworthy for Psalm 136 is the following verse about mercy offered upon confession:

Leviticus 26:40-45 If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; ⁴¹ And *that* I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: ⁴² Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land. ⁴³ The land also shall be left of them, and shall enjoy her sabbaths, while she lieth desolate without them: and they shall accept of the punishment of their iniquity: because, even because they despised my judgments, and because their soul abhorred my statutes. ⁴⁴ And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I *am* the LORD their God. ⁴⁵ But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors,

whom I brought forth **out of the land of Egypt** in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God: I *am* the LORD.

God saved their forefathers out of the land of Egypt to be His people before the nations. So He continues to offer His *hesed* to them, and even in advance points them to repentance to be who He has purposed them to be by delivering them from Egyptian bondage. This relates to the context of the Psalm as it develops in verses twenty-three and twenty-four about God remembering them in their weakness and redeeming them from their enemies. The context and reason for such unending loving-kindness always held out before them is that He has delivered them for this purpose, and it is His faithful keeping of His promise not only to their fathers who were delivered out of Egypt, but His promise to Abraham that He would do so and maintain His seed.

The phrase also is constantly appealed to for correcting the people's waywardness and to draw them to faithfully follow their mighty Deliverer and warn against turning away from Him:

Exodus 16:6 And Moses and Aaron said unto all the children of Israel, At even, then ye shall know that the LORD hath brought you **out from the land of Egypt**:

See also Exodus 16:32; Deuteronomy 6:10; 8:14; 9:7; 13:5-10; 29:25; Jeremiah 7:22-25; 11:4-7; Ezekiel 20:8-10; Amos 9:7; Micah 6:4. This call to repent while pointing to God's dealings with His people whom He brought "out of Egypt" continues into the New Testament as a significant part of an argument: Acts 7:36, 40; 13:15-41; Hebrews 8:9; Jude 1:5.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that it was God that destroyed the firstborn of Egypt (11:28). This is what the Psalmist here celebrates. It is an example of God delivering His people by destroying their oppressors. Thus the phrase also was a referent to embolden Israel:

Deuteronomy 20:1 When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, *and* a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the LORD thy God *is* with thee, which brought thee up **out of the land of Egypt**.

Joshua 24:4-7 And I gave unto Isaac Jacob and Esau: and I gave unto Esau mount Seir, to possess it; but Jacob and his children went down into Egypt. ⁵ I sent Moses also and Aaron, and I plagued **Egypt**, according to that which I did among them: and afterward **I brought you out**. ⁶ And I brought your fathers **out of Egypt**: and ye came unto the sea; and the Egyptians pursued after your fathers with chariots and horsemen unto the Red sea. ⁷ And when they cried unto the LORD, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea upon them, and covered them; and your eyes have seen what I have done in Egypt: and ye dwelt in the wilderness a long season.

Isaiah 11:15-16 And the LORD shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make *men* go over dryshod. ¹⁶ And there shall be an highway for the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria; like as it was to Israel in the day that he came up **out of the land of Egypt**.

Looking ahead to the verses in Psalm 136 about God redeeming them when they were low, I think it is likely that the book of Judges is now in view, although possibly not exclusively if the author did live after the monarchy and possibly the exile and return. As demonstrated with drawing out the main sections of the Psalm at the beginning of this paper, it seems that the Psalmist follows each of the books of the Pentateuch and into Joshua. It would not be unlikely that he continues to follow the order of redemptive-history chronicled where Israel was particularly low, as there was an ebb and flow of being punished for sin and then being redeemed by foreign oppressors upon repentance:

Judges 2:11-18 And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim: ¹² And they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, which brought them **out of the land of Egypt**, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that *were* round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the LORD to anger. ¹³ And they forsook the LORD, and served Baal and Ashtaroth. ¹⁴ And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. ¹⁵ Whithersoever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn unto them: and they were greatly distressed. ¹⁶ Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them. ¹⁷ And yet they would not hearken unto their judges, but they went a whoring after other gods, and bowed themselves unto them: they turned quickly out of the way which

their fathers walked in, obeying the commandments of the LORD; *but* they did not so. ¹⁸ And when the LORD raised them up judges, then the LORD was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented the LORD because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them.

The phrase also is a reference when godly leaders rise up and direct the people back to their God:

1 Samuel 12:5-6 ⁶ And Samuel said unto the people, *It is* the LORD that advanced Moses and Aaron, and that brought your fathers up **out of the land of Egypt**.

Thus, Israel can trust God to deliver them at all times and from every threat.

Verse 12

בִּיד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָהּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסִדוֹ:

With a hand strong, and by an arm stretched out; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

I favor trying to keep the word order, as it helps to emphasize “seeing” the hand actively pounding away at our enemies, and an arm stretched out against them on which we can cling. These phrases are very important throughout the Old Testament, and are usually connected to being redeemed out of Egypt or from other nations:

Exodus 13:9 And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in thy mouth: for with a **strong hand** hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt. [See also Exodus 32:11.]

Deuteronomy 5:15 And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and *that* the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a **mighty hand and by a stretched out arm**: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day. [See also Deut. 6:21; 7:8; 9:26 (notice also, “has redeemed you”); 26:8; Jeremiah 32:21.]

Also, with a memorial at Gilgal on the other side of the Jordan, connecting their experience of being delivered through the river with the earlier deliverance through the Red Sea in Joshua 4:23, Joshua says in verse 24: “That all the people of the earth might know **the hand of the LORD**,

that it is mighty: that ye might fear the LORD your God for ever.” The phrase is also an important refrain with the prophets:

Jeremiah 32:19-23 Great in counsel, and mighty in work: for thine eyes *are* open upon all the ways of the sons of men: to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings: ²⁰ ¹ Which hast set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, *even* unto this day, and in Israel, and among *other* men; and hast made thee a name, as at this day; ²¹ And hast brought forth thy people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs, and with wonders, and with **a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm**, and with great terror; ²² And hast given them this land, which thou didst swear to their fathers to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey; ²³ And they came in, and possessed it; but they obeyed not thy voice, neither walked in thy law; they have done nothing of all that thou commandedst them to do: therefore thou hast caused all this evil to come upon them:

Daniel 9:15 And now, O Lord our God, that hast brought thy people forth out of the land of Egypt with a **mighty hand**, and hast gotten thee renown, as at this day; we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

Frighteningly, similar phrasing is turned against Israel with the prophesy of Babylonian judgment for their bighting the hand that fed them:

Jeremiah 21:5 And I myself will fight against you **with an outstretched hand and with a strong arm**, even in anger, and in fury, and in great wrath. [See also Ezekiel 20:34.]

These prophesies relate to the purpose of the Psalm: reminding Israel of God’s covenantal mercy, but also warning against turning away from this same mercy which ensures their survival.

Relating *hesed* to the Law in Exodus 20:5 and 6, Sorg also notes: “It is understood that the punishment of sinners is the true operation of *Hesed*. Were God not a lover, He might disregard and forget about them.”⁵⁶ Rust concurs in saying “... the prophets never ceased to believe that even the judgment was but the underside, the strange work, of the divine covenant-love,

⁵⁶ Sorg, 23.

chesedh.”⁵⁷ Clark also notes that “When people are reminded of Yahweh’s חֶסֶד (Isa 63.7; Ps. 106.7), there are overtones of rebuke for their rebellion against him.”⁵⁸

Verse 13

לְגִזֵּר יַם־סוּף לְגִזְרִים כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:

To the One Who divided the Red Sea into parts; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

This verse is fairly straight forward. Whether “Red” should be translated “Reed” goes beyond the scope of this paper. I defer to the example of all the standard translations, and do not wish to digress into this relatively unimportant, yet controversial discussion. I also follow the example of switching the order of the words Sea and Red to Red Sea as there would seem to be less reason to preserve the word order in this case, as no obvious emphasis is intended.

It is interesting that in Exodus 14:16, בָּקַע, “rip open” is used for how God tells Moses He will “divide” the sea as the Egyptians advance to retrieve them, which it seems all the translations render the word. It would be more dramatically appealing for the scene to go with “rip open”. Here in the Psalm, the word more naturally meaning “divide” is used. This is probably of no significance exegetically, and simply flexibility in style.

Verse 14

וְהַעֲבִיר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹכּוֹ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:

And Who caused Israel to pass through its midst; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

⁵⁷ Rust, 333.

⁵⁸ Clark, 199.

The opening verb is the Hiphil perfect third person masculine singular of עָבַר, “cause to pass”. With no significant loss in changing the word order here, I have broken up וַיַּעְבִּיר around the word Israel for a smoother English reading and singing.

God’s causing Israel to pass through the sea is quite a contrast with how Manasseh treated his son unto death, with the same form of the verb:

2 Kings 21:6 And he **made** his son **pass through** the fire, and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards: he wrought much wickedness in the sight of the LORD, to provoke *him* to anger.

God is much kinder to His son, causing Israel to pass through the water unto deliverance. So He should rightly be thanked and praised for His unending *hesed*.

The use of בְּתוֹכָוּ for “through its midst” is in construct form, obviously referring to the Red Sea. The root word תָּוַךְ for “midst” has been used already in a different form in verse eleven when describing how God brought Israel out of the “midst” of Egyptian slavery. This seems to be a word play to connect how God delivers Israel out of the midst of one kind of danger and through the midst of another, showing that He is always reliable, involved, and determined to bring them through the midst of all adversities with and for Himself.

Verse 15

וַיִּנְעַר פְּרַעֲהַ וְחֵילוֹ בַּיַּם-סוּף כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסָדָיו:

And *utterly* shook Pharaoh and his host in *the* Red Sea; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

I like supplying the two words “utterly shook” given as the default lexicon listing in Whittaker’s Revised BDB in BibleWorks (pg 654,251) for the Piel perfect form (which intensifies) of נָעַר for the violently visual conception that “overthrew” (ESV, KJV, NAU, NKJ) and “swept” (NIV) don’t quite capture. Using “utterly shook”, one can almost see Pharaoh being shaken like the rag

doll that he is in the strong hand of the outstretched arm of Yahweh until the powerful earthly king is utterly broken and lifeless.

The use of חַיִל here for “host” or army is consistent with the same noun used in the original narrative of the event in Exodus 14:9, there translated as “horsemen” by most all the translations, and “host” (ESV, KJV) or “army” (NAU, NIV, NKJ) in Exodus 15:4. I prefer to leave it as “host”, as it should conjure up ideas of the “Lord of hosts” in many significant Scripture scenes of God battling the wicked, which use another word commonly translated “hosts” or “army”, צְבָאָה. This is a preference that seems appropriate in the context for a subtle, broader connection to all of redemptive history; but it is not required or important.

The BHS notes on this verse about perhaps deleting the masculine of וַחַיִלּוֹ on account of סוּף־בַּיָּם and vice-versa are vague and of no importance.⁵⁹

Verse 16

לְמוֹלִיךְ עָמוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדּוֹ:

To the One Who led His people through the wilderness; for unceasing is His *covenant* mercy.

The Hiphil participle of הִלֵּךְ (literally, “cause to walk”) is properly translated by all as “led”. The Hithpael, Qal, and Piel forms of the word would be “walked”, and this might be helpful to mention in application of the Psalm to help us once again “see” God leading as our Shepherd, going before us, pointing out that He personally led through the Red Sea and in the wilderness in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Like a shepherd leads his flock within their midst, so God was with His people, in their midst, and continued to be in the tabernacle and temple. The word “led” on its own isn’t as vivid in this regard, but it is better not to veer off the natural translation. Still, it would be wise to help people see how God personally led the people,

⁵⁹ BHS, 1216.

walking with them as a shepherd does his sheep through these redemptive deliverances—and that He still does so in the Spirit with us through our earthly sojourn.

We should not overlook עַמּוֹ, “his people”; these people are God’s possession, His particular people, and that is why they benefit from His infinite *hesed*.

The כּ particle preposition is appropriately translated “through” in all the translations referenced throughout this paper, as it best fits the context of God delivering out of the midst of Egypt and through the midst of the Red Sea. While “in” or “by” is most often the preposition’s rendering, “through” gets at the picture of the story best.

Still, it is important to reflect on the fact that God gave His law to the people “in” the wilderness, and their time in the wilderness was a major epoch in their development as a nation. Just as deliverance from Egypt through the Red Sea is a major redemptive-historical reference for the Old Testament people to remember who they are and Who is their God, so the reminder of God leading His people through the wilderness as narrated in the book of Exodus and Numbers is another indelible mark in Israel’s history that is often brought to mind by her leaders. And it is essentially in the wilderness during the Transjordan interlude where Moses reiterates who they are as God’s people and recapitulates His law given to them before they take the Promised Land. The wilderness journeys are a vital part of their filial and national history; so Moses preaches:

Deuteronomy 8:2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy God led thee these forty years **in the wilderness**, to humble thee, *and* to prove thee, to know what *was* in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ See also Leviticus 7:38; Deuteronomy 8:15-16; 9:7, 28; 11:5; 29:4; Joshua 5:4-6; 14:10; 24:7; Judges 11:16-18; 2 Chronicles 1:2; 24:9; Psalm 78: 19, 40, 52; Psalm 95:8; Psalm 106:14, 26; Jeremiah 2:2, 6; Ezekiel 20 (the theme of the entire chapter); and Amos 2:10 and 5:25. Note that, while most of these citations do give detail about and focus on Israel’s rebellious ways, and especially in Psalm 78 that similarly highlights Israel’s history, Psalm 136 does not comment on such things and rather stays on the theme of God’s faithfulness and unending mercy to His people.

Of course, the wilderness plays an important backdrop in the life of David and the context of many of his Psalms, and especially so in the forty days of the testing of Jesus at the start of His ministry as the Son of God who did obey the Father. Jesus points to the typology of Moses lifting up the snake in the wilderness as how He would be lifted up to provide salvation from eternal death in John 3:14, and He also refers to the wilderness later in John 6:31 and 49. Stephen bases much of his sermon on Israel's history in the wilderness as he warns the Jews (Acts 7:30, 36, 38, 42, 44). Other rhetorical appeals to the wilderness wanderings follow in Acts 13:18, 1 Corinthians 10:5, and Hebrews 3:8, 17.

And the wilderness is the referent for Israel's leaders again crying out for mercy when the exiles return:

Nehemiah 9:18-22 ¹⁸ Yea, when they had made them a molten calf, and said, This *is* thy God that brought thee up out of Egypt, and had wrought great provocations; ¹⁹ Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go. ²⁰ Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst. ²¹ Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them **in the wilderness**, *so that* they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not. ²² Moreover thou gavest them kingdoms and nations, and didst divide them into corners: so they possessed the land of Sihon, and the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan.

Nehemiah's reference to the wilderness journeys of God's people highlight's God's faithfulness, and this points to how this verse about God delivering through the wilderness is used in Psalm 136. While the verse is short and at first glance transitional, the failings of the Israelites in the wilderness is in the background, because the focus of the Psalm is on how God has, by his infinite *hesed*, shepherded His people through each epoch of their national and needy existence. It is interesting that Nehemiah also transitions out of the wilderness recount and into God delivering the land of Kings Sihon and Og into His people's hands, as that also is where the historical selections of the Psalm next progress.

Verse 17

לְמַכָּה מְלָכִים גְּדֹלִים כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:

To the One Who smote great kings; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

We have some context coming in subsequent verses as to who these great kings are. This verse is fairly straight forward. The opening prepositional participle is again the Hiphil of נָכָה—God smiting great kings as He had earlier smote the Egyptian’s first born.

Verse 18

וַיַּהַרְגַּ מְלָכִים אֲדִירִים כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:

And slew famous kings; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

Verse 18 is synonymous parallelism with verse seventeen, emphasizing the grandeur of God’s dominion over earthly powers, and so the people can trust in Him completely.

Translating וַיַּהַרְגַּ “And slew” (KJV, NAU, NKJ) rather than “and killed” (ESV, NIV) is preferable again for what might conjure up visions of a sword in the hand of the Warrior having done the work. The Psalm is full of events with the activity of God as defender, shepherd, and military deliverer, and when words can appropriately help envision the activity and the nature of the activity, all the better.

The plural form of אֲדִירִים translated as “famous” by the KJV and NKJ is preferable to “mighty” in the ESV, NAU, and NIV, because the lexicons have it as “majestic”. To use “majestic” in this context to our modern ears may not carry as accurate a sense as “famous” would communicate, which is better than mighty to reflect the Hebrew word. God destroys the first kings that Israel

encounters in the Transjordan following their wilderness wanderings as the nation readies to enter the Promised Land.

Verse 19

לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסְדּוֹ:

Sihon, King of the Amorites; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

The story of Israel's interaction with King Sihon is found in Numbers 21:21-32, which Moses gives more detail about in his speech in the second chapter of Deuteronomy. Israel sent messengers to Sihon, asking for safe passage through his land, promising not to disturb his fields, take of his vineyards, or even drink from his wells (Moses says later in Deuteronomy 2:28 that he stipulated they would need to buy such resources as they went through). But rather than acquiesce, Sihon sent a host of warriors to fight against them. Moses notes in Deuteronomy 2:30 that this was because God had hardened the king's heart, just as he had done to Pharaoh, so that God may give them the land (even more than what was promised!). Israel destroyed them by the sword and took all Sihon's cities and spoil. Next, Moses sends men to take other areas and they dwelt in the land of the Amorites.

In this account, God is not directly credited for the victory, and we see the action of the people and their swords at the forefront. But Psalm 136 gives all the glory to God for the victory. The next battle that follows in Numbers, however, is the next king mentioned in Psalm 136; and in this account, God dialogues with His people about victory in both battles as His doing.

Verse 20

וְלְעוֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסְדּוֹ:

And Og, King of Bashan; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

Right after destroying Sihon and taking the Amorites' land, Israel encounters King Og of Bashan in Numbers 21:33-35. While they were passing through his land, they had not advanced against him. But he too meets them with his warriors for battle. And God assures His people of victory:

Numbers 21:34 And the LORD said unto Moses, Fear him not: for I have delivered him into thy hand, and all his people, and his land; and thou shalt do to him as thou didst unto Sihon king of the Amorites, which dwelt at Heshbon.

Notice God says in advance that He has already delivered Og and his troops into Israel's hand, and consequently their land, just as things happened against Sihon and the Amorites. The implication is thus that God also delivered them from Sihon, as Psalm 136 extols.

Rahab points to God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and from Sihon and Og as something that all of Jericho heard about upon the nation's advance into Canaan, and she was so sure by these events that God would give them her land that she asked to be spared and be one of them (Joshua 2:10). The Gibeonites explain that they tricked Joshua into sparing them because they heard the same news about the defeat of these kings and dreaded what would otherwise be their same fate (Joshua 9:10). As the listing of the territories are described, these kings and their lands are referenced often as delivered by God. Jephthah recounts the story again in Judges chapter eleven to explain how the Lord gave them the land after they were attacked when he was demanded by the king of the Ammonites to give it back to them. Sihon and Og also are referenced in 1 Kings 4 when the land is discussed, and Nehemiah references these victories in his national prayer of repentance (Nehemiah 9:22). Psalm 135 remembers the same story almost in the same way in terms of that section of the Psalm, although its focus is more on the greatness of the name of God, which also is said to last forever. Thus, the same story of conquering kings Sihon and Og are used in two adjacent Psalms to extol different attributes of God: His name, and His mercy respectively.

These Transjordan military victories are, like the other redemptive events extolled as God's mighty acts in Psalm 136, illustrations of eternal mercy upon His people. They also are so recounted at the beginning and the end of Deuteronomy by Moses, speaking for God, to embolden the people to go on without him and take the Promised Land:

Deuteronomy 31:2-7 ² And he said unto them, I *am* an hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in: also the LORD hath said unto me, Thou shalt not go over this Jordan. ³ The LORD thy God, he will go over before thee, *and* he will destroy these nations from before thee, and thou shalt possess them: *and* Joshua, he shall go over before thee, as the LORD hath said. ⁴ **And the LORD shall do unto them as he did to Sihon and to Og, kings of the Amorites, and unto the land of them, whom he destroyed.** ⁵ And the LORD shall give them up before your face, that ye may do unto them according unto all the commandments which I have commanded you. ⁶ Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he *it is* that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. ⁷ And Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, Be strong and of a good courage: for thou must go with this people unto the land which the LORD hath sworn unto their fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it.

Verse 21

וַנִּתֵּן אֶרְצָם לְנַחֲלָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ:

And gave their land for *an* inheritance; for unceasing is His *covenant* mercy.

The land is given to Israel as their inheritance, which God had promised Abraham He would do. It is lovely to notice that this same phrase, “for an inheritance”, לְנַחֲלָה, is the same phrase used in Psalm 33:12 to describe what Israel itself is to be: Gods’ inheritance: “Blessed *is* the nation whose God *is* the LORD; *and* the people *whom* he hath chosen for his own **inheritance** [לְנַחֲלָה].” Even more, God says that the Levitical priests are to be given no land of their own, because “I am their inheritance [אֲנִי נַחֲלָתָם].” And so the land that king Sihon and Og possessed was given to the Israelites, even before they were given the Promised Land, as a sort of first fruits and encouragement to look back on and be courageous:

Numbers 32:33 And Moses gave unto them, *even* to the children of Gad, and to the children of Reuben, and unto half the tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land, with the cities thereof in the coasts, *even* the cities of the country round about.

Deuteronomy 29:7-8 And when ye came unto this place, Sihon the king of Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan, came out against us unto battle, and we

smote them: ⁸ And we took their land, and gave it for an inheritance unto the Reubenites, and to the Gadites, and to the half tribe of Manasseh.

And Moses explains that getting the Transjordan as an inheritance was God's purpose for setting the hearts of the pagan kings against the Israelites in the first place (Deuteronomy 2:30-31). As well, as God is the One who by Himself made the earth and all that is in it, it was really His to give to the Israelites. It had been on loan, in a sense, to Sihon and Og for God's redemptive purposes of *hesed* for His people at this appointed time—to give them their own land.

The *BHS* note about לְנַחֲלָה as being in different forms in some medieval Hebrew manuscripts, such as is rendered in Psalm 135:12 seems insignificant and does not warrant attention in translating this text.

Verse 22

נַחֲלָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדוֹ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסְדּוֹ:

An inheritance to Israel His servant; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

This land of inheritance is for His inheritance, His *servant* Israel. Israel is the focus of the *hesed* of God, and it exists to serve Him. They are His sole possession to serve and glorify Him, and thus they are the sole possessor of this *hesed*. All that God mercifully does by virtue of His infinite mercy is on behalf of the Covenant of Grace developing throughout redemptive history. No doubt, there is always a visible and invisible people (Romans 9:6), but God operates through the means of the visibly chosen people that He makes His own to be His servant through particular means. Thus the glorious words of the prophet:

Isaiah 48:20 Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter it *even* to the end of the earth; say ye, The LORD hath redeemed his **servant** [עֲבָדָיו] Jacob.

Verse 23

שָׁבַשְׁפִּלְנוּ זָכַר לָנוּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסְדּוֹ:

Who in our low estate remembered us; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

The first word of this sentence is a unique construction thus far: שְׁבִשְׁפִלְנוּ, “Who in our low estate.” It is made up of the relative particle שְׁ, “Who”, the particle preposition בְּ, “in”, and the construct (showing possession) of the first person common masculine of the noun, שְׁפִל, “low estate”, with the singular plural suffix, נוּ, “us”.

While this and the next synonymously parallel verse are more general in nature, the Psalm seems to continue to move through the major books and experiences of Old Testament redemptive history. Here, following the conquest of the Promised Land, it is likely in view that Israel goes through a terrible time of apostasy in the book of Judges.

The *BHS* notes that for the word שְׁבִשְׁפִלְנוּ the Targums omit the relative particle שְׁ. There is no reason to omit it here, and it fits the context better along with the participial phrases beginning many of the sentences.

Verse 24

וַיִּפְרֹקֵנוּ מִצָּרֵינוּ כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ:

And rent us from our foes; for unceasing is His covenant mercy.

The word “rescued” for פָּרַק in any form of the verb should be something like “tear” or “tear off”. It is a violent and visible notion that I would like to preserve.

An example of how the word can be used in such a vivid way:

1 Kings 19:11 And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind **rent** [מִפְּרָק] the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; *but* the LORD *was* not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; *but* the LORD *was* not in the earthquake:

And another example elsewhere within the Psalter:

Psalm 7:2 Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending [פָּרַק] *it* in pieces, while *there is* none to deliver.

While “redeemed” as the KJV has it, and “freed” the NIV, are both nice concepts to overlap broader soteriological applications, “rescued” as the ESV, NAU, and NKJV render it is a good word for these considerations and aiming to have some visual sense of “tear away”, which I think “rescue” does better than “redeem” or “free”. Still, I prefer “rent” as in the example of 1 Kings above, to be more visual and also intimate the possessive jealousy that God has for us, and it further moves within the theme of *hesed*.

As the Psalms are to be sung, the alliteration of translating מִצָּרֵינוּ as “from our foes” in English as the ESV has it is preferred.

Verse 25

נָתַן לֶחֶם לְכָל-בָּשָׂר כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ:

The One Who gives food for all flesh; for unceasing is His *covenant* mercy.

With singing in English in mind once again, the alliterative value of “food” rather than “bread” for לֶחֶם (often used generally for “food”) is preferred to go with “for” in place of “to” for the Lamed preposition, along with “all flesh”.

Here the Psalmist seems to be bringing things to a close by focusing on how all the living rely on God for their sustenance, for He is the God of gods, the Lord of Lords, the one Who alone does wondrous works (verses 2 to 4), Who alone made the heavens and the earth, and the lights that govern the day and night (verses 5 to 9). There appears to be an *inclusio* developing here and into the last verse of a general sense of God being the only true God. Not so much with *hesed* toward general creation in view, but that He is the only God over all things. Thus, the fact that

He shows eternal *hesed* to His chosen people throughout their history, and always, is reason for exultation and thanksgiving: “‘Hesed’ governs that marvelous relation between God and the blessed ones of His election and love ... The whole Psalter is bathed in its color and light.”⁶¹ Glueck concurs: “In the older sources, the common usage of *hesed* never means an arbitrary demonstration of grace, kindness, favor or love.”⁶² He adds, “God’s *hesed* can only be understood as Yahweh’s covenantal relationship toward his followers.”⁶³ Clark agrees: “Yahweh’s חֶסֶד is especially directed to his own chosen people ...”⁶⁴ So the Psalm closes with the same call for His people to give Him thanks to the only God from Whom all creation is sustained by His power, and Who has chosen them. The Psalmist frames Israel’s redemptive history in the bookends of creation and providence.

Verse 26

הוֹדוּ לְאֵל הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסְדּוֹ:

Give thanks to *the* God of the heavens; for unceasing *is* His *covenant* mercy.

Here the Psalmist ends where he began: causing God to be thanked and praised, as He is the God of the heavens (with the ה article not omitted and thus rendering שָׁמַיִם plural as it is technically to accommodate the article appropriately in English; the plural sounds even grander, bigger, and is appropriate to close out the Psalm superlatively).

It is another common refrain throughout the Scriptures to extol the God of heaven, maker of heaven and earth, over against the false gods whom are credited with power over pieces of

⁶¹ Sorg, 10.

⁶² Glueck, 55.

⁶³ Ibid, 102.

⁶⁴ Clark, 161.

creation by pagans. Israel's God is the God of gods over all of creation, as His throne is in the heaven:

Isaiah 66:1-2 Thus saith the LORD, The heaven *is* my throne, and the earth *is* my footstool: where *is* the house that ye build unto me? and where *is* the place of my rest? For all those *things* hath mine hand made, and all those *things* have been, saith the LORD: but to this *man* will I look, *even to him that is* poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

And this is what the Psalmist would have us to do. To tremble with thankful praise before the LORD who is above all things and has chosen us, and always delivers us, even from the midst of our own sin—to praise Him where His Son now sits ruling, having conquered even the sting of sin and death on our behalf, ensuring us of His unending covenant mercy.

Theological Analysis, Propositions, And Faith Applications

While God's people are responsible and bound to Him because of His covenant mercy, His *hesed* is unconditional because it flows from His eternity and infinite goodness. God is personally involved with His chosen people in acting out His *hesed* for them in the wonders of creation and providence, which set the stage for redemptive history and the unfolding of the plan of salvation.

Since God's *hesed* is toward His chosen people in every generation, we should respond as the Psalmist commands in giving thanks to the LORD always: "Above all, the saints are those who enjoy the knowledge and confidence in God's *Hesed*. It is their life and song ..." ⁶⁵ And when we worry about whether we could lose our salvation at times when we fall into the most grievous of sins, our hearts most definitely should overflow with joy at the assurance we have in God's *hesed*.

⁶⁵ Sorg, 25.

In addition, as *hesed* is personified in the Hebrew word *hasid* (plural *hasidim*), ‘godly ones’, ‘holy ones’, ‘saints’, “They are the human reciprocation of God’s Hesed.”⁶⁶ As God shows *hesed* to us, so we should show *hesed* to our brethren: Proverbs 11:17, “The **merciful** [hesed] man doeth good to his own soul: but *he that is* cruel troubleth his own flesh.” And this should be the shining identity of the body of Jesus Christ: “The very character of the Hasidim necessarily leads to the formation of community among themselves. As the name indicates, the Hasidim are especially votaries of God’s Hesed.”⁶⁷

It is through Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 17:14), and the Covenant of Grace that God’s mercy endures forever to us.

⁶⁶ Sorg, 11.

⁶⁷ Sorg, 30.

Sermon Outline on Psalm 136:

Intro: Do you have assurance of your salvation? What about at times when you have fallen into terrible sins individually and corporately? How can you know that you have not lost your salvation, your relationship with the LORD?

(Explain Psalm 136's history and unique structure as the Great Hallel, and how the refrain is illustrated by various epochs of our family history of the people of faith.)

EP: The Psalmist calls us to give thanks to the only God Who rules over the universe through His wondrous acts of creation and general providence, and in particular, Who personally involves Himself with Israel's history of national deliverance, provision, conquest, and redemption, all because of His good and unceasing covenant mercy to them.

This is your covenant history. Israel is the church that you are a part of, for which Christ Jesus secured salvation. So,

HP: Give thanks to Jesus Christ throughout your life, for He alone preserves you through His unceasing covenant mercy.

Move 1: God expresses His unceasing covenant mercy to you His people on the stage of creation and providence.

Explain: Psalm 136, Vss. 5-9; 25 with highlights of Genesis 1:1-10; 14-19 and sections of Psalm 104 and Psalm 147.

Illustrate: Point to the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, warmth of sun and the moonlight at night. Point to how the land and weather provide food. Point to shelter, family, modern medicine and technology.

Apply: Enjoy the beauty and majesty of God's creation, and remember that every gift you have that sustains you on this Earth is from the hands of your heavenly father of lights, Who created all things.

Transition: And it is on the stage of creation that He providentially delivers you.

Move 2: God expresses His unceasing covenant mercy to you by reminding you of how He delivered your spiritual fathers from Egyptian slavery and through the Red Sea.

Explain: Psalm 136, Vss. 10-15 with highlights from Exodus 13-15. "Out of the Land of Egypt" a constant refrain in the OT and even the NT.

Illustrate: Miriam and Moses sang songs of thanksgiving to the Lord on the other side of the Red Sea.

Apply: So we should give thanks to God in remembering this great redemptive act, and know that it applies to our lives. Our God is the God who saved our spiritual fathers, and He has the same power to save you from sin and death.

Transition: And He not only delivers us from oppression, but leads us as the Good Shepherd.

Move 3: God expresses His unceasing covenant mercy to you by reminding you of how He personally led your spiritual fathers through the wilderness and conquered your and our foes.

Explain: Psalm 136, Vss. 16-22. “Through the wilderness” an important reference through the OT.

Background of Sihon and Og from Numbers/Deuteronomy.

Prof Williams, Repetitious Mercy sermon: “Christian, this is your history, and notice that the script is written for the defense of your fathers. You may not have thanked God lately for slaying Og, king of Bashan, but you have reason to. The chunk of covenantal history recounted here is proof of the everlasting mercy of God reiterated by the Lord of lords when He said ‘... I will build My church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it’ (Matt 16:18).”

Illustrate: Give wilderness pictures and the need for a Shepherd. How he walked with them and walks with us through our earthly sojourn as we wait for heaven. Psalm 23 highlights. Talk about how David as king led in the battles when he led like Christ leads.

Apply: Larger Catechism on Christ’s Kingly Office.

Transition: And after the wilderness comes the Promised Land.

Move 4: God expresses His unceasing covenant mercy to you by reminding you of your eternal inheritance for which He preserves you to inhabit and serve Him.

Explain: Vss. 21-24. Abrahamic Covenant. Type of heaven.

Illustrate: Land was flowing with milk and honey. Hebrews 4 and 11, they and we are waiting for the heavenly Promised Land above (Galatians 4:26).

Apply: TULIP “Perseverance [preservation] of the saints,” using Westminster Standards.

Keep your mind on heavenly things. Remember your home is a city without walls and built by God. And He gives it to you as He conquers the hearts of men throughout the nations and will redeem the world on the Last Day.

Transition: And why is this so? How can you know for sure you won't lose this hope of glory?

Move 5: God does all things for you by virtue of His unceasing covenant mercy.

Explain: Twenty-six refrains of Psalm 136. Unique structure's emphasis.

'olam and hesed.

Illustrate: How would it feel to be chosen [adoption]?

How long is forever? What might it look like. What might it feel like? Assurance. Confidence. HOPE!

Apply: Romans 4:17-5:5.

Transition: And Psalm 136 thus tells us to give God thanks, for only He can do this for us.

Move 6: He is the Only One in Whom You can trust!

Explain: Psalm 136, Vss. 1-4, 26.

Illustrate: What else can you trust in this world to never cease? Government? Family? Health? Wealth? Life? Nothing! Though we cling to these things and worry about them, none of them lasts.

Apply: So Jesus tells us to store up treasures for ourselves in heaven and not to worry about tomorrow. And we can trust in His commands, for He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Westminster Standards on Covenant of Grace.

Transition: So you can be assured of your salvation, and you can be thankful!

Conclusion:

Every time you lack assurance in your relationship with God, turn to Psalm 136 and sing of His covenant mercy that He never ceases to extend to you. And sing it to others who need to be reminded that God will never forsake them, just as He never forsook Israel.

Be thankful! Be thankful always! Rejoice in God's unceasing covenant mercy! Praise Him for it! Turn your eyes to it through the lens of Redemptive History extolled in this Psalm to see you through your own journey. God will deliver you from your foes, lead you through your trials, guide you along your earthly journey, and conquer your enemies. He remembers you and redeems you always, and He is leading you into the eternal Promised Land where your own room is being prepared for you by Jesus Christ Himself! So,

HP: Give thanks to Jesus Christ throughout your life, for He alone preserves you through His unceasing covenant mercy.

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