

Amazing Grace: Do we really understand it?

The Christian world is big on grace; it's all about grace, did not the Messiah after-all come full of 'grace and truth'?

Grace it seems, abounds in the New Testament and has its pinnacle at the Cross. Thanks to the 'grace' of the Crucifixion, all who believe, (or perhaps, if you believe in Universalism, even all mankind, of all time), are 'saved' by grace and thanks to this 'unmerited favour', there is nothing, absolutely nothing else needed to be added to this 'finished work' of the Cross.

Or at least that's what we are led to believe. Perhaps we should all dig a little deeper given the huge significance attached to 'grace'.

I believe that if you join me on such an investigation, it will lead you to some startling findings and to a much greater clarity around this word and it's proper meaning and import.

To search out this term and its full implications, there are a number of vital approaches and studies we need to do. For example, we need to look back as far as we can to the original Hebrew word(s) that were used in the Tanakh to refer to grace, and that therefore underpin the Greek word(s) used to refer to 'grace' in the Greek versions of the New Testament (which have then been translated into the English word, 'grace').

We also need to investigate the passages in the NT that also reflect the use of words by Yeshua or his disciples, or others within Israel during the times of Yeshua and his first followers. As these Israelites spoke predominately in Hebrew¹ (and Aramaic), we can also be fairly sure that the same Hebrew word(s) were being used, as found in the Tanakh. If we also look at New Testament passages that quote verses from the Tanakh that use the Hebrew root words behind 'grace', we should also get a clearer picture of how this word and concept is being applied.

We should also look to the context of the passages where this word(s) is/are used and, given our perhaps changed perceptions, based on improved understanding of their meaning, reconsider the word(s) and concept, within its context.

I will now attempt to do this:

The Biblical Hebrew language had a lot less words (around 8000) than Greek and English (at least 150,000 up to as much as 1 million in Modern English). This meant that some words could be used to mean a number of different things and the use could sometimes only be known by the context (and even then not always with full confidence).

For example, the Hebrew word 'nacak' (נָצַק) has a primary meaning of 'pour out' as in 'pour out a libation or religious offering'. This word is found in Psalms 2:6 where most translations give a secondary meaning of the word such as 'installed' or 'set'².

The two words that are most often translated 'grace' (and sometimes translated as 'goodness' or 'loving kindness' or 'mercy' and even as 'thing'!), are חֵן (chen) and חֶסֶד (chesed).

One simple example to start with is 1 Peter 5:5 which is quoting Proverbs 3:34:

*"Likewise, you who are less experienced, submit to leaders. Further, all of you should clothe yourselves in humility toward one another, because God opposes the arrogant, but to the humble he gives **grace**."* – 1 Peter 5:5

*"The scornful he scorns, but gives **grace** (חֵן - chen) to the humble."* – Prov 3:34

Even in this very basic example of the grace of God, we should see that 'it' (whatever 'grace' is – I will try and elaborate on this), is being given to those who are 'humble' (as opposed to the arrogant or scornful). That is, there is a criteria than the person must meet to receive this 'grace'. So even in this very simple example, we can see the implication that such 'favour' is not totally unmerited in that the receiver was first found to be humble rather than scornful. That is, his heart was open toward correction and God.

¹ See my book 'The New Testament: The Hebrew Behind The Greek' - <http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Testament-Hebrew-ebook/dp/B009XQ0NQJ/>

² See my article on Ps 2:6 for the significance of this meaning - <http://circumcisedheart.info/Christian%20site/Psalm%202%20verse%206%20commentary.pdf>

Let us look at how a few different translations present one of the fascinating uses of 'chesed' (חֶסֶד) in the Psalms.

Psalms 89:2

KJV: *"For I have said, **Mercy** (chesed) shall be built up for ever: thy faithfulness shalt thou establish in the very heavens."*

Amplified Bible: *"For I have said, **Mercy and loving-kindness**³ shall be built up forever; Your faithfulness will You establish in the very heavens"*

ESV: *"I will sing of the **steadfast love** of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. For I said, **steadfast love** will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness."* -

Complete Jewish Bible: *"I will sing about Adonai's acts of **grace** forever, with my mouth proclaim your faithfulness to all generations; because I said, **"Grace** is built to last forever; in the heavens themselves you established your faithfulness."*

Note here that the translators translate 'chesed' in a number of ways such as mercy, kindness, loving kindness, steadfast love or grace.⁴

The central Hebrew phrase here in verse 2 is transliterated as 'Olam Chesed Yibaneh'). Most Jewish commentary on this phrase translates it as "The world is built with *chesed* (grace)."

If you enter this Hebrew phrase into Google Translate it returns something like 'Built on Kindness World' or 'Built of grace world' (depending on minor vowel pointing differences, etc.).

I want to consider two issues here. First how the Jewish understanding seems to me to fit the context better and second, what this phrase seems to imply.

Consider Ps 89:1-3 written with the Jewish understanding, but with 'chesed' replaced by 'grace' to aid the Gentle Christian reading:

*"I will sing of the grace of YHVH, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. For I said, **the world is built with grace**; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness."*

Remembering the Hebraic poetic approach to often repeat a phrase in the same or almost identical manner to emphasis it. The first declaration establishes a reverence from the author (King David) for the 'grace' of God. The phrase '*the world is built with grace*' is repeated in a slightly different way with 'in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness'. That is, the creation is both a demonstration of, and results from, the 'grace' of God, but the creation (the heavens) are also a means through which God declares his on-going 'grace' and reliability or trustworthiness (faithfulness).

The Jewish understanding of '*chesed*' is that of the concept of 'kindness' or love that is overflowing and having few boundaries. Or to state it another way, '*grace*' means '*overflowing and boundless kindness*'. The view then that the creation itself is an example of the overflowing and boundless 'love' or kindness of God certainly fits with this interpretation of Ps 89:1-3.

There are two ways though that this phrase can be understood still. As already intimated, it can be seen as a declaration of the Almighty's great act of grace in creating this Universe and in sustaining it moment by moment, but it can also be seen as embodied the true purpose of man and that is through grace to built the world he lives in daily.

In the Talmud, there is a very famous statement that:

'The world rests upon three things:

Upon Torah study, upon Divine service (i.e., prayer and sacrifices), and upon the practice of chesed (grace).

- Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:2

It appears that the third of these pillars is derived from this understanding of Ps 89:2, so that we can say "And upon the practice of chesed (grace)" – as it is written, "The world will be built through kindness (grace)". That is, it is man's practice of grace in his dealings with his fellow man that truly creates and sustains the world. It is man's practice of grace that most perfectly embodies his being made in the 'image of God'.

³ While ONLY the Hebrew word 'chesed' is used here, this Amplified Bible translates it as 'mercy and loving-kindness'.

⁴ These words don't all mean exactly the same thing, even in the same context, so we can already see some issues developing from this.

So it seems fitting to me that both these understandings are correct. It was the 'overflowing love' (grace) of the Almighty that created and continues to sustain the world, and it is the 'overflowing love' (grace) of mankind that day by day and moment by moment creates and sustains a world worth living in!

And in fact, it is this very act of 'overflowing love' (grace) towards our fellow man, that Micah so eloquently and emphatically declares is the very thing that God has called us to do: *"He has told you, O man, what is good! What does your God ask of you, that you do justice, that you love (do) grace ('chesed'), and walk humbly with your God."* - Micah 6:8.

The Christian View:

If this is how most Jewish Rabbis and scholars interpret this phrase of Ps 89:2, 'Olam Chesed Yibaneh', with its awesome sense of great grace, why have most of the Christian translators and biblical scholars failed to see this passage in the same light and have instead, generally translated it as *'Mercy shall be built up for ever'*?

While this interpretation is still a most powerful declaration of the love of God, it is not quite as all-encompassing. I would suggest that there may have been a hidden agenda here to reduce the impact and centrality of 'boundless love' or 'grace' in the Tanakh, so as to accentuate by contrast its centrality in the New Testament.

What other evidence is there for this 'hidden agenda'?

As already noted חַן ('chen' - Strong's 2580/2581 – grace or charm) and חֶסֶד ('chesed' - Strong's 2616/2617 grace, mercy or undue favor), are replaced in Greek by 'charis' (Strong's 5485/5463) which means "grace or charm" and 'eleos' (Strong's 1651/1653) which means "grace, mercy or undue favor."

However, most Christian translators such as with the KJV translated 'chen/charis' as 'grace' and 'chesed/eleos' as 'mercy' (which is not consistent with the understanding of Ps 89:2 as explained above).

Given that most understand the 'grace' of the NT to be 'undue favour', we can see a clear distortion of this message. This is again evident in the KJV where 'chen' only appears around 70 times in the Tanakh but, 'charis' some 230+ times in the NT, making it appear that there is much more 'grace' in the NT. But as 'chesed' is more appropriately the word for 'undue favour' or 'overflowing love', then comparing the occurrence of 'chesed' and 'eleos' we find that 'chesed' appears over 250 times in the Tanakh, while 'eleos' appears only some 50 times in the Greek NT.

So if we use this numerical comparison, to base our appraisal of how much 'grace' there is in these two parts of our Bible, we find the Tanakh in fact contains more grace!

So perhaps a subtle and hidden agenda is indeed evident in the approach the translators have used.

You might ask, how has the understanding been developed that 'chesed' can refer to 'kindness' that is overflowing and having few boundaries. The answer comes from an unusual passage in Lev 20:17.

*"If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a **disgrace**, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness, and he shall bear his iniquity."* – Lev 20:17 (ESV)

*"And if a man shall take his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and see her nakedness, and she see his nakedness; it is a wicked **thing**; and they shall be cut off in the sight of their people: he hath uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity."* - Lev 20:17 (KJV)

The word translated in the ESV as '**dis-grace**' and in the KJV as '**thing**' is actually 'chesed'! Here, in describing this totally immoral act of incest, 'chesed' is used to speak of a character trait that has no proper boundaries; of behaviour that has gone beyond the norm, beyond what might or should be expected.

This is why the Jewish understanding of the 'kindness' or 'love' embodied in the word 'chesed', is that it is a character trait (which when used for good and not evil) goes beyond, past deserving, to 'undue favour' or 'overflowing love'.

Abraham:

The story of Abraham and Sodom is a good example of grace in action. Abraham was known far and wide for his hospitality to all travellers who passed by. This was a small example of the 'grace' he lived by. Abraham hears of God's plans to destroy Sodom and then engages with God's angel, with God's representative who has come to carry out the judgment on Sodom. Abraham would appear to have nothing to gain from saving Sodom. Given Abraham's righteousness and Sodom's decadence and immorality, we can be fairly sure that Abraham had no plans to visit Sodom.

Even though his nephew Lot lived there, Abraham and Lot had parted ways, so that Abraham would only see Lot if Lot came to visit him. And yet, Abraham pleads for Sodom. If there is any righteousness in Sodom, he asks if God will spare (show grace to) the city. God responds to Abraham's act of grace by showing grace to Lot and saving Lot's family from the great destruction.

I think that this is a great example of grace in action, both the grace or 'overflowing love' of Abraham and the 'overflowing love' of God. But it is also vital that we recognize that even with such grace, there are limits; there are pre-conditions to grace.

For example, we learn that the Almighty had good reasons to choose Abraham to be the 'father' of the Chosen People, Israel.

We read in Gen 18:19: *"I have chosen him so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just. Then the LORD will give to Abraham what he promised him."* – Genesis 18:19 (NET) and that because Abraham trusted or believed ('had faith in' – see Romans 4:16) the words of YHVH - *"Then he brought him outside and said, "Look up at the sky, and count the stars - if you can count them! Your descendants will be that many!" He believed in YHVH, and he credited it to him as righteousness."* – Genesis 15:5-6).

Grace comes with conditions:

So while there is no doubt that the original Creation of the Universe was an act of boundless love ('chesed') with no criteria or conditions imposed, when we start to consider all examples of this boundless or overflowing love which involve mankind, we see that there are some conditions, such criteria than man must meet if he is to be the recipient of this grace ('chesed') or 'overflowing love'.

Therefore, there is a sense in which the definition most commonly preferred for 'grace' of 'unmerited favour' is not totally correct. While it is true that God's favour extends beyond what we merit or deserve, it does not extend without limits. He still places some expectations on us.

This is perhaps also seen in the Temple service. While often interpreted by outsiders as just a lot of ritual, the Temple service was really about communion with God. It was about being obedient to the Almighty's explicit instructions and interacting, or talking with Him, yet it first required a repentant heart before He would be prepared to fully listen.

This is seen in the prayer of King David - Ps 51:15-19

"15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem;

19 then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar."

The prophet Hosea repeats this call for Israel to demonstrate 'grace' in its relationship with God and with each other. He writes *"For I desired **grace** ('chesed'), and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."* – Hosea 6:6

What do you think 'chesed' means in this context, appreciating the truth of Psalm 51 that YHVH still wishes sacrifices, but he indicates a pre-condition. I would suggest that the Prophet Hosea is making it clear that Israel and her people need to demonstrate 'grace' that is consistent and enduring 'overflowing love' in their relationship with God (and their neighbour), not just the mechanics of obedient to the rituals of the sacrifices.

Look at how this verse is introduced in Hosea 6:

*"1. **Come, let us return to the LORD;** for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.*

2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

3 Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.

4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.

5 Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light.”

6 “For I desired **grace** (*‘chesed’*), and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

We see here a description of Israel’s love as having failed because it, like the morning dew, as not endured.

We can get further confirmation of this intent in the use of ‘grace’ by looking at how Yeshua used this very passage when he quoted it:

“10 And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?

12 But when he heard it, he said, Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

13 Go and learn what this means, I desire **grace**⁵, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” – Matthew 9:10-13

It seems clear to me that Yeshua (who had stated that he came for the ‘lost sheep’ of Israel), was concerned to reach those who were not displaying ‘grace’ in their relationship with God and their neighbour. He was a ‘physician’, a doctor of healing, who sought out those needing ‘healing’ and by implication there were some in Israel already ‘healed’, that is, already exhibiting ‘grace’ and already in right relationship with God.

Yeshua also quoted Hosea 6:6 in Matthew 12:7-8:

“7 And if you had known what this means, I desire **grace**, and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless.

8 For the son of man is lord of the Sabbath.”

This reference occurs when Yeshua is questioned about his disciples supposedly ‘breaking’ the Sabbath⁶.

I believe that in this context Yeshua is arguing that the disciples had not broken the Sabbath (they were therefore ‘guiltless’); that the Sabbath is for man’s benefit, not for his bondage (i.e. mankind - this is how ‘son of man’ should be understood in this passage - is master of the Sabbath as it is provided by God, for man’s benefit), and significantly if those questioning him had appreciated the ‘overflowing love’ (grace) of the Almighty in providing the Sabbath, they would have in turn reciprocated this ‘grace’ towards both God and their fellow Israelites and not questioned the hungry disciples behaviour.

The Fear of the Lord:

From these few Scriptures I believe it is clear that the Almighty calls upon us to display ‘grace’ or ‘overflowing love’ toward Him, and our brothers and sisters. But also, it seems clear that such ‘grace’ that both He and we are to exhibit does have conditions or boundaries attached. One of those is a ‘knowledge’ (Hosea 6:6) or ‘fear’ (awesome respect of, or humility before) of God.

The pre-condition of such ‘fear’ is evident in these few passages:

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his grace (*chesed*) toward those who fear him.” - Psalm 103:11

“Oh let those who fear YHWH say, “His grace (*chesed*) is everlasting.” - Psalm 118:4

“By grace (*chesed*) and truth iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of YHWH one keeps away from evil.” - Proverbs 16:6

“...that he may learn the fear of YHWH his God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to do them:” - Deut. 17:19

⁵ Most translations have ‘mercy’ rather than ‘grace’ though the Hebrew (of Hosea 6:6) being quoted in most definitely ‘chesed’ and thus, as already explained, ‘grace’ is a better and more accurate translation.

⁶ See my book *‘The New Testament: The Hebrew Behind the Greek’* (p13) for a discussion of this incident.

“...that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear YHWH your God, and observe to do all the words of this Torah.” - Deut. 31:12

Clearly it requires great knowledge of the Almighty to properly appreciate the Creator and King of the Universe (given that we can't physically see or touch Him). This 'knowledge' is only gained through studying His Word and living a life of overflowing love or grace. This is of course so well summed up in the Ten Words; in Leviticus 19:18 and Gal 5:14.

In conclusion, I have tried to give Scriptural evidence to show that true grace is not a totally free 'get out of jail' card. It requires us to 'know and honour/fear God' (the first Tablet⁷) and to act with grace toward our neighbour⁸ (the second Tablet).

So, while the definition of 'grace' as 'unmerited favour' is not wrong per se, this 'favour' does, to some degree have boundaries and conditions attached. Thus grace is something that extends significantly beyond the boundaries of normal expectations, and is much more than 'measure for measure' or fair compensation, so that it can be seen to be 'overflowing', but it is not limitless in application.

As Gentiles, I believe we should appreciate that when some tell us that all we need do is 'believe', to be 'saved'; we should rather recognize that the 'grace' of this message is flawed, if it does not involve an accountability and a relationship. It is not a 'free lunch'.

Also, unless Israel obeys and loves Yehovah (YHVH), the nation herself will not enjoy the full measure of the divine Grace (chesed) that her Husband offers her.

Unless those of us grafted into the Commonwealth of Israel through the perfect loving example of Yeshua obey and love Yehovah, we cannot expect to receive the full measure of His divine Grace either.

We must act with 'grace' if we wish to receive 'Grace' beyond measure.

While there is much more to say about 'grace', I want to finish (while I am hopefully ahead!), with some insight from the brilliant Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, that I think brings out the importance of this '*acting with grace*'⁹.

Rabbi Sacks (excerpts only¹⁰):

“Abraham sees a palace. That means that he sees the world has order. Therefore, it has a Creator. But the palace is in flames! – which means the world is full of disorder. It is full of evil, violence, injustice. Now nobody builds a building and then goes away and deserts it. Therefore, if there is a fire there must be somebody in charge to put it out. The building must have an owner. Where is he? And that is Abraham's question. Where is God in this world?”

That is the question that gives Abraham no peace. Here, if I am right, that is the starting point of Jewish faith.

In Judaism, faith does not begin with an answer. It begins with a question. It doesn't begin in harmony. It begins in dissonance.

Here it is: if God created the world then God created man. Why then does God allow man to destroy the world? How can we reconcile the order of the world with the disorder of human society? Can God have made the world only to desert it? That is Abraham's question. Can it be the world has no-one in charge, no owner? That is his question. ...”

Rabbi Sacks goes on to explain that there are only two logical possibilities here and what they are and imply, but that Abraham rejects both of them¹¹!

“... Either God exists, in which case there is no evil. Or evil exists, in which case there is no God. But supposing both exist? Supposing there are both God and evil? Supposing there are both the palace and the flames?”

⁷ The Two Tablets of the Ten Commandments

⁸ “Acts of 'chesed' (grace) are the active representation of a covenant among people, a social contract” - Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow, Rabbi/Director of Religious Services at Hebrew Senior Life, Boston

⁹ His insight/speech I am quoting from touches on evil. Evil is an even bigger question than grace! A whole discipline (theodicy) is devoted to it! I do not wish to pursue the question of evil at this time, but I do wish to stress the answer of grace.

¹⁰ <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/2000/11/06/faith-lectures-judaism-justice-and-tragedy-confronting-the-problem-of-evil/#.UfJdJeCEsZc>

¹¹ Part of the answer is a sense in which evil is not evil after all – confused? Read Rabbi Sacks article and book.

Now if that is so, if my interpretation is right, then Judaism begins not in the conventional place where faith is thought to begin, namely in wonder that the world is. **Judaism¹² begins in the opposite, in the protest against a world that is not as it ought to be.**

At the very heart of reality, by which I mean reality as we see it, from our point of view, there is a contradiction between order and chaos: the order of creation and the chaos we make.

Now the question is: how do we resolve that contradiction?

And the answer is that that contradiction between the palace and the flames, between the world that is and the world that ought to be, cannot be resolved at the level of thought. It doesn't exist! You cannot resolve it! Logically, philosophically, in terms of theology or theodicy, you cannot do it!

The only way you can resolve that tension is by action; by making the world better than it is. That is the only way you can lessen the tension between the palace and the flames. When things are as they ought to be, when there is only a palace and no flames – then we have resolved the tension. Then we have reached our destination. But that is not yet.

It was not yet for Abraham and it is not yet for us. And from this initial contradiction, from this cognitive dissonance, are born the following ... fundamental features (of Judaism):

Firstly, the primary thing (in Judaism) is 'doing', is action, is deed, is mitzvah. Because only the mitzvah makes the world a little less dissonant between what it is and what it ought to be.

Secondly: the whole programme of Judaism, the project of the Torah, is 'tikkun olam' in the precise sense 'mending a fragmented, fractured, world'. ..."

This is, I believe, the perfect definition of the 'grace' we are called to exhibit, if we desire to receive the Grace of Yehovah!

We are to act with 'overflowing love' toward our neighbour, and our fractured, hurting world.

In this action; in this daily deed; we will attain the true unity with our Father and our brother Yeshua that we desire. We will then be truly acting as the image of His Majesty¹³, as we become partakers with the Creator in '**building the world with grace**' (Ps 89:2). Praise Yah!

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While not directly quoted in this article, I am indebted to the scholarship and understanding of these authors, whose ideas I have made much use of:

Rav Shmuel Bornstein (Sochatchover Rebbe) - Excerpts from 'Shem MiShmuel' (rendered into English by Rabbi Zvi Belovski) - <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/sms/87615597.html>

Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen, Torah Portions:

Masay (Numbers 33-36) 'The Torah's Definition of Chesed' - <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/ql/126082098.html>

Kedoshim (Leviticus 19-20) 'Understanding the True Meaning of 'Chesed'- <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/ql/120696719.html>

¹² Or we could say, the message of the Tanakh, the message of Yehovah and His Son, begins here

¹³ Genesis 1:27