

## 'FOR HE IS GOOD'

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The discovery and publication of a number of ancient treaty texts during the past decade or so has opened a new phase in the investigation of the covenant or treaty theme in the Old Testament. Two types of study have arisen from this, comparison of entire covenant 'documents' and their formulation within the Bible and without, and examination of the meanings of particular terms found in covenants.<sup>1</sup> Among the words most recently discussed is טובה, which is found, by analogy with the use of its cognate in Aramaic and Akkadian, to denote 'friendship (made by treaty)' in some passages in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Far more common than the abstract טובה in Hebrew is the adjective טוב, describing the quality of 'goodness', whether as a physical state or an abstract attribute, in many occurrences. However, in one phrase it is possible that a more definite concept is inherent in טוב when considered in the light of the special usage of טובה. The phrase is in the summons to worship, 'O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures for ever'. It is well known that 'mercy' (or 'loving-kindness, constancy'), חסד, is frequently employed in connection with God's covenant with Israel,<sup>3</sup> so the parallelism of חסד with טוב might indicate a similar association in the latter word. This 'summons' occurs in the context of praise to God

1. For a survey of the field of study and its relevance, see J. A. Thompson, *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and the Old Testament*, Tyndale Press, London (1964).
2. D. R. Hillers, *BASOR* 176 (1964) 46-47.
3. N. Glueck, *Das Wort Hesed im altestamentlichen Sprachgebrauch*, A. Töpelmann, Berlin (1927); N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, Epworth Press, London (1944) 100-110; H. J. Stoebe, *VT* 2 (1952) 244-254.

at the accomplishment of a task such as bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, dedicating the Temple in Solomon's reign, and relaying its foundations after the Exile (1 Ch. 16:34; 2 Ch. 5:13; 7:3; Ezr. 3:11), in hymns of praise recounting the activity of God on behalf of His servants in preservation from perils and return to the sanctuary, in giving victory, in the national history of the Exodus and Conquest (Pss. 107:1; 118:1, 29; 106:1; 136:1), and at restoration from exile (Je. 33:11). Inherent in each of these instances is the thought that God has been performing His part of the Covenant-promises. The covenant theme is more evident in such passages as:

'Praise the Lord! For the Lord is good.

Sing to his name for it is pleasant.

For the Lord chose Jacob for himself, Israel for his treasure.'

(Ps. 135:3, 4)

'For the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting,

And his faithfulness is from generation to generation.'

(Ps. 100:5)

'The Lord is good and upright . . .

All the paths of the Lord are mercy and faithfulness

For those who keep his covenant and his testimonies'.

(Ps. 25:8, 10)

The covenant-terms סגולה, 'treasure',<sup>4</sup> חסד, 'mercy', אמונה 'faithfulness', ישר, 'upright', beside טוב in these examples emphasize its possible covenant connotation. Therefore the word may express the nature of one who exhibits the טובה, 'friendship', arising from a covenant to which he is a party. Deuteronomy 6:18 illustrates this from Israel's side: 'You shall perform what is right (ישר) and good (טוב) in the sight of the Lord, so that it may be well with you (ייתב)'. The close association with חסד might suggest that that word could describe the action of one who is טוב as well, or better than, טובה. Herein a Hebrew addition to the covenant terminology may be found, for no equivalent of חסד is known at

4. J. A. Thompson, *op. cit.* 35-36; cf. M. Held, *JCS* 15 (1961) 11-12 for philological and semantic information.

present in other ancient covenant texts.<sup>5</sup> Israel's unique, divinely initiated, covenant would appear to underlie this. In contrast טוב, טובה have extra-biblical links in human application.

'Gracious', the older English rendering found in the Psalter,<sup>6</sup> may be retained as appropriate for טוב as an attribute of God, although this is a covenanted and not an entirely unexpected attitude. The man who knew God through the covenant could be assured that 'Goodness and mercy' (טוב וחסד) would always follow him (Ps. 23:6).<sup>7</sup>

5. J. A. Thompson, *op. cit.* 38.

6. See also *The Revised Psalter*, SPCK, London (1964).

7. Cf. A. L. Merrill, *VT* 15 (1965) 357, applying the psalm to the king.