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Forgiveness in the LXX

The Messianic 130th Psalm sings in its key verse: "There is forgiveness with Thee." The Hebrew *salach* (forgiveness, to forgive) is generally rendered in the Septuagint by *ἵλασμός*, *ἰλάσσομαι*. Its primary significance is to shelter, to cover. The classics transposed its meaning to the religious procedure of the conciliation of the gods; with them *ἰλάσσομαι* denotes obtaining the favor of the gods. Homer always uses it so.

Our Latin-English verb *cover* is a direct lineal descendant of the Hebrew *kaphar*, the noun in the LXX being *ἵλασμός*, and translated "propitiation," "atone," "atonement." The verb *ἐξιλάσσομαι* does not occur in the New Testament and is rare in the papyri. We have, however, *ἰλάσσεσθαι* Heb. 2, 17: *ἵνα ἐλεήμων γένηται καὶ πρὸς ἀρχιερεῖς τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν, εἰς τὸ ἰλάσσειν αὐτὸν τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ*; "that he might become merciful and a faithful High Priest before God to propitiate [forgive] the sins of the people." Cp. Luke 18, 13, *ἰλάσθητί μοι τῶ ἁμαρτωλῷ*.

In the LXX particularly, the passive *ἰλάσσεσθαι* is "to be reconciled," "to be gracious," Ps. 25, 11; 78, 38; also *ἰλάσθητι*, imperative aorist passive, Ps. 79, 9; Dan. 9, 19. While *ἰλάσσεσθαι* occurs only nine times in the entire Bible, it is all the more remarkable to note that the LXX much more frequently employs the more emphatic *ἐξιλάσσεσθαι*, to make *thoroughly* propitious, to *completely* reconcile.

In the New Testament, *ἄφεις* or *ἀφίημι* are most frequent for "forgiveness" and "forgive," common to all evangelists, Paul, James, and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. A quick count shows that *ἀφίημι* and its forms occur 135 times. In the inscriptions the word often means "remission of debt," or "remission of punishment." Already the classics had this for the second meaning of the verb, *viz.*, to "release," "let go free," "acquit," "deliver" — the perfect synonym of Latin *absolvo, libero*. A liturgical book of the fourth or the fifth century A. D. (the Egerton P. 5) has: "Σῆς ἀνεξικακίας ἔργον ἄφεις αἰμαρτιῶν," *i. e.*, "Thy long-suffering's work is forgiveness of sin."

From *kaphar* comes *kapporeth*, in LXX *ἰλαστήριον*, the LXX's Greek for "mercy-seat," or the lid of gold covering the ark of the covenant, Ex. 25, Lev. 16. This, it will be remembered, was sprinkled once a year by the high priest with the blood of the goat on the head of which were confessed the sins of the people. In the New Testament this type is fulfilled in the antitype Christ Jesus. The *kapporeth*, also sometimes explained as the *place* of expiation, is more properly the expiatory *covering*, not only of the ark as depository of the Law but of the Law itself. It serves to receive the atoning blood. Not until the blood is on the *kapporeth*, is this

latter what it is meant to be, viz., the propitiation for the people's sins. The blood completely covers the Law and the multitude of the sins of the people. Thus the *kapporeth* becomes the central seat of the saving presence and gracious revelation of God.

Accordingly, our Lord Jesus Christ is designated the true *λαστήριον*, Rom. 3, 25, for He, as the true High Priest and one all-sufficient Sacrifice, at the same time comes ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ αἵματι and not as the typical high priest of the Old Testament ἐν αἵματι ἀλλοτριῷ, which he had to discharge himself of by sprinkling it on the *kapporeth*. "Philo calls the *kapporeth* σύμβολον τῆς ἰλεω τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεως." (Cremer.)

To err is human, to forgive divine;
 Forgiveness may, then, yet be mine!
 The sinless lips have said, "Forgiven";
 Pardon is, then, a gift divine
 And love indeed a law of heaven."

There is forgiveness in the Scriptures from Moses to John the Theologian. The only theology worthy of the name is forgiveness theology, which is congruent with Bible theology and coincident with Lutheran theology; for "*quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum.*"

Let us look at divine forgiveness in the LXX. Ex. 25, 22: "And there will I meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat (τὸ ἰλαστήριον)." This gracious procedure of the Lord God Almighty is further made plain in Ex. 33, 11: "And the Lord spake unto Moses as a man speaketh unto his friend." The text has ἐνώπιος ἐνώπιω, literally, "eye to eye"; such is the close communion between God and His servant. Not servant only, but also friend, φίλος, for God has established the bond of friendship between Him and Abraham, the express φίλος θεοῦ, Jas. 2, 23; 2 Chron. 20, 7; Is. 41, 8, also upon Moses. In the New Dispensation we may well sing: "O Friend of souls, how blest am I!" The only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father authentically and truly declares the latter, John 15, 15, when He says: "Henceforth I call you not servants . . .; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you" — φίλοι, not δοῦλοι, what undeserved mercy! The Lord deigns to treat us not as inferiors outside the heavenly counsels, but as those who have a very definite share in His affection. We are again eye to eye with the *nosse cum affectu et effectu*. There is a double force in the fact that the LXX, speaking, as it does, in a Ptolemaic Greek, employs φίλος, a force fully felt only since a more voluminous deciphering of our papyrus treasures. It is now clear that φίλος was a specific title of honor given at the court of the Ptolemies to the highest royal officials. This ennobled

understanding of the simple word is supported by the fact that in Esther 2, 18 it was used by the LXX to render the Hebrew *sar*, "prince" in the King James Version. This, then, is the difference between the two words, not slaves but members of His royal court, His friends, having audience with Him and interested in the concerns of His kingdom. Forgiveness makes this friendship possible.

Again, from the Mount of the Law comes a mention of mercy, Ex. 34, 5—7: "And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there." The cloud, ἐν νεφέλῃ, is used in the LXX for *shechinah*, the cloud of glory (cp. Ex. 16, 7. 10 *et al.*). The Lord stood with him there, παρέστη αὐτῷ ἐκεῖ; second aorist indicative of *παρίστημι*, a verb bringing to mind the "sure mercies of David" as we compare its use in the LXX and the New Testament, e. g., 2 Tim. 4, 17: ὁ δὲ κύριός μοι παρέστη καὶ ἐνεδυνάμωσέν με, "the Lord stood by me and strengthened me." In legal parlance of the fourth century A. D. the verb is frequently employed by attorneys assuring the court that their witness will be present and certainly "stand by" with their testimony so that justice can be satisfied, a usage that has come down from the LXX and the New Testament. (Cp. the numerous legal papyri in the Cairo Museum, especially Nos. 10,484, 10,493, 10,688, and 10,689.) Obviously, then, *παρίστημι* has the force of "standing by," ready to "support and uphold." To make such assurance doubly sure, the Lord stood by Moses, with a message of mercy unmistakably following: "And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed the Lord" (and now divine Forgiveness inspired a divine characterization), "The Lord, a God full of compassion, and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, *forgiving* iniquity and transgression and sin." A linguistic study of this inspired sentence brings some interesting and at the same time consolatory facts to mind: Literally, the Lord proclaims Himself a "God of compassions and mercies," οἰκτιρῶν καὶ ἐλεήμων — οἰκτεῖρω, or Attic, οἰκτίρω, I pity, a verb exactly synonymous with ἐλεέω, I have pity on. This is also exactly the way in which ἐλεεῖν is used in the many petitionary papyri of the Greco-Roman period. So, for instance, the Fayum Papyrus No. 106, from 140 A. D., contains a petition by Dr. M. Valerius Gemellus to the praefectus of his circuit requesting to be relieved, partly on the ground of his busy profession, partly on account of his health, from his duties of superintendent to estates confiscated by the government. The sixteenth line of this petition is of special interest to us, where we read: Κύριε, ὅθεν ἀξιῶ σαὶ τὸν σωτήρα ἐλεῆσαι με, "Lord, I entreat you, my redeemer, that you may have pity on me." This heaping of synonyms (to return to our text) again proclaims the sureness of God's mercy. The Lord is "slow to anger," μακρόθυμος, patient with people, long-suffering;

cp. μακροθυμέω, I defer my anger, I am long-suffering, I am not quick-tempered. He is also "plenteous in mercy and truth," πολυέλεος και ἀληθινός (an emphatic parallel), full of mercy and (literally) made of truth; "keeping mercy for thousands," δικαιοσύνην διατηρῶν και ἔλεος εἰς χιλιάδας, keeping righteousness and mercy for thousands, accusative plural of χιλιάς (in Deut. 7, 9 "for a thousand generations," εἰς χιλιάς γενεάς). Διατηρέω bears closer notice here; it denotes to hold fast, hold in safe keeping, to keep continually. Just as Mary continually kept Jesus' words in her heart, διετήρησεν, so God will not be forgetful of His mercies. Such is the divine economy that, as the Law is given, grace is promised in the same divine breath (δικαιοσύνην . . . και ἔλεος). "Forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin," ἀφαιρῶν, present participle of ἀφαιρέω, I take away. The term connotes complete removal; cp. Is. 27, 9; Jer. 31, 33. 34 as quoted in Rom. 11, 27, ὅταν ἀφέλωμαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν. This connotation is corroborated by a Christian papyrus prayer found in Heracleopolis Magna (the erstwhile capital of Dynasties 7—10 of the First Disintegration), where the same verb occurs in the line: "Take away from me all manner of disease and all manner of sickness that I may be in health." Here, assuredly, the petitioner prayed for a complete removal of his ailments. (Wilcken, *Archiv fuer Papyruskunde*, I, p. 431 ff.) Finally what is it that God takes away and out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy forgives? The answer is: ἀνομία, lawlessness, in particular as disobedience to the divine Law: sin; ἀδικία, unrighteousness (cp. ἀδικέω, I act unjustly) and ἁμαρτία, error, sin. Here, then, it is again: Sin and grace; the divine doctrine of forgiveness.

King Solomon utters prayer at the Temple dedication, and five times in succession his prayer pleads forgiveness, 1 Kings 8: "Hear Thou in heaven, Thy dwelling-place (οἰκητήριον, Latin *habitaculum*), and forgive." The LXX here has the adjective ἕλεως for "forgive," the Attic form of ἕλαος, literally, Thou shalt be merciful, propitious, forgiving. The Κοινή of both LXX and New Testament employs the prayerful interjection ἕλεώς σοι, i. e., ἕλεως εἴη ὁ θεός. Luke 18, 13, which uses the aorist imperative of ἕλάσσομαι, is pertinent here for comparison (see above). In their sixth volume of *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Drs. Grenfell and Hunt list a "Letter to Flavianus" of the fourth century A. D. which plainly shows the New Testament sense of ἕλεως. The papyrus is an affectionately worded Christian letter, according to all appearances from a servant to his master concerning the illness of his mistress. The style shows a decided influence of the New Testament, with a polish that reminds one of St. Luke: Καὶ εἴη διὰ παντός ἡμᾶς χάριτας ὁμολογοῦντας διατελεῖν ὅτι ἡμῖν ἕλεως ἐγένετο και ταῖς εὐχαῖς ἡμῶν ἐπένευσεν διασώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ἡμῶν κυρίαν: "And may it be granted us to continue

forever to acknowledge our thanks to Him because He was gracious to us and inclined His ear to our prayers by preserving for us our mistress." (P. Oxyr. 939, 6—9.) According to Hesychius *ὕλως* was of the same meaning as *ἰλαρός* and also attributed to the gods the same quality as *ἰλαρός* does to men, only with the transitive notion that this graciousness and cheerfulness is the source of good will towards men. In the Bible it is the divine attribute which exists in God, that gracious sentiment that opposes the imputation of sin. Cf. Num. 14, 19: "Ἀφες τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου, καθάπερ ἔλεως αὐτοῖς ἐγένου. In the New Testament see Heb. 8, 12: ὕλως ἔσομαι ταῖς ἀδικίαις αὐτῶν, from Jer. 31, 34.

In this connection should be noted the very profundity of Solomon's prayer in the same chapter, vv. 38. 39: "What prayer and supplication soever be made (*πᾶσαν προσευχὴν*, all prayer that possibly should ever be made, *γένηται*, futuristic subjunctive, second aorist) by any man or by all Thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, . . . *forgive* and *do* and *give* to every man according to his ways, whose heart Thou knowest, for Thou, even Thou only, knowest (*μονώτατος οἶδας*—superlative of *μόνος*, alone; 'as God alone knows' the hearts of all the children of men."

Forgiveness is also the burden of Solomon's night vision in 2 Chron. 7, 12. 14. "The Lord appeared to Solomon by night and said unto him, I have heard thy prayer. . . . If thy people shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will *forgive* (*ὕλως ἔσομαι*) their sin." Here are noteworthy the four subjunctives with *ἐάν*:

1. *Ἐντρατῆ*, from *ἐντρέπω*, turn to shame and confusion; cp. 1 Cor. 4, 14, where St. Paul tells the Corinthians that he is not writing thus to shame, or humiliate, them: *Οὐκ ἐντρέπων ὑμᾶς γράφω ταῦτα*. Also Tit. 2, 8: *ἐντρατῆ*. The celebrated and somewhat amusing letter of Apollonius (Paris Papyrus No. 47, 153 B. C.), whose faith in the gods of his father, Ptolemaeus, foundered badly when he was lost in a great forest, has: "But for the fact that I am a little ashamed (*ἐντρέπομαι*), you would never yet have seen my face; all things are false, and your gods with the rest." This late metaphorical use of the verb is found in the LXX and the New Testament as we have seen. For further comparison of its usage there see 2 Thess. 3, 14 and Luke 7, 6.

2. *Προσεύξωνται*, from *πρός* and *εὔχομαι*, pray.

3. *Ζητήσωσιν*, from *ζητέω*, Latin *quaero*, I search for. The verb occurs in the sense of to "strive" in an imperial edict concerning the *Aurum Coronarium*, in the late third century A. D. (P. Fayum

20, 14.) The emperor, most likely Alexander Severus, writes: "Ever since I became Caesar, I have earnestly striven (ζητήσεων) to restore vigor to what was in decline."

4. Ἀποστρέψωσιν, from ἀποστρέφω, I turn myself away from.

Before advancing this study on forgiveness to a few representative New Testament instances, it must be mentioned that there is a further promise of forgiveness through most of the remainder of the Old Testament, such as Ps. 86, 5; 103, 3; Is. 33, 24; 55, 7; Jer. 3, 12; 31, 20. 34; 33, 8; Dan. 9, 9; Micah 7, 18, and many more.

The New Testament is replete with various classic examples of forgiveness. Let our first be that of the paralytic in the house at Capernaum, Matt. 9, 2: "Be of good cheer, son; thy sins are forgiven thee": θάρσει, τέκνον, ἀφέωνται σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι. Ἀφέωνται is a Doric form used instead of ἀφείνται, perfect passive of ἀφήμι. At this time the μi-verbs are more and more disappearing in the Κοινή in favor of the omega inflection. It marks the beginning of the end of this special class of verb. In the Κοινή the old forms still continue besides the new ones for some time. Those formed according to the omega pattern appear in the lower language strata first, but gradually they penetrate even into literary texts. A present tense ἀφίω is found as early as the second century B. C. We meet with it in well-authenticated New Testament variants. The Acta Thomae have the analogical subjunctive ἀφήση. Our own form of ἀφέωνται becomes more frequent following the Apostolic Fathers. It is already common in the second century A. D. (*Inscr. Ponti* II, 401. 15); note especially the Liturgical Fragment, P. Amherst, I, 44: ἀφέωνται and ἀφείντε. The form also occurs in the Ionic; the Arcadian dialect had ἀφεώσθη.

The Gospel of forgiveness is preached Luke 7 to the penitent woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee: "Thy sins are forgiven": ἀφέωνται σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι. Although Mark employs ἐλεέω, the moving story of blind Bartimaeus should be included here, for these three, the paralytic, the penitent woman, and Bartimaeus, belong together in any study on forgiveness. The scholarly Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was so impressed by the genius of the Greek in this Gospel that he wrote his song

Blind Bartimaeus

Blind Bartimaeus at the gates
Of Jericho in darkness waits.
He hears the crowd; he hears a breath
Say, "It is Christ of Nazareth."
And calls in tongues of agony,
'Ιησοῦ, ἐλέησόν με!

The thronging multitudes increase.
 "Blind Bartimaeus, hold thy peace!"
 But still above the noisy crowd
 The beggar's cry is shrill and loud,
 Until they say, "He calleth Thee."
 Θάρσει, ἔγειραι, φωνεῖ σε!

Then saith the Christ as silent stands
 The crowd, "What wilt thou at My hands?"
 And he replies, "Oh, give me light!
 Rabbi, restore the blind man's sight!"
 And Jesus answers, "Ὑπαγε·
 Ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέ σε!

Ye that have eyes that cannot see
 In darkness and in misery,
 Recall those mighty voices three,
 Ἰησοῦ, ἐλέησόν με!
 Θάρσει, ἔγειραι! Ὑπαγε·
 Ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέ σε!

Our authority κατ' ἐξοχὴν on forgiveness is the Father's only-begotten Son, who, being "in the bosom" of the Father and therefore knowing His innermost thoughts and will of grace, can well "declare" Him unto us. Even in Jesus' darkest hour of woe He still so "declares" Him amidst the shuddering populace when He calls on the Father's mercy for the sake of others, including His bitter enemies, Luke 23, 34: "Father forgive them": Πάτερ, ἄφεσις αὐτοῖς (second aorist imperative).

It is for this same purpose that the Father's will to forgive be made known at home and abroad that Jesus turns Saul, the persecutor, and says to him, Acts 26, 15—18: "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise and stand upon thy feet; for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose to make thee a minister and a witness, . . . delivering thee from the people and from the Gentiles unto whom now I send thee to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God that they may receive forgiveness of sins," ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. How blessed for us indeed that Paul was "not disobedient to the heavenly vision, τῇ οὐρανίῳ ὁπτασίᾳ," to offer and proclaim forgiveness of sins to his hearers.

The last sacred writer of our Canon shall conclude our *ex-cursus* into the heavenly field of forgiveness as we read once more 1 John 2, 1. 2: Καὶ ἐάν τις ἁμάρτη, παράκλητον ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν δίκαιον· καὶ αὐτὸς ἰλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου. Again, chap. 4, 10: Ἐν τούτῳ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐχ ὅτι ἡμεῖς ἠγαπήκαμεν τὸν θεόν, ἀλλ' ὅτι αὐτὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ