

Forgiveness in the Bible— Old Testament

Introduction

The English word *forgive* has a quite singular meaning—unlike the word *kill*, for example, which requires context before it can be understood. I do something to cause you to be biologically dead rather than alive, thus killing you. Or I kill your dreams and aspirations. I kill a volleyball or tennis ball by hitting it so hard and fast that my opponent cannot return it; on the other hand, if I'm playing soccer I do the opposite—I kill the ball by stopping it! Or I might kill a bottle of beer, that is, chug the entire thing. And when I say my feet are killing me, I in no way mean, of course, that my feet are killing me! And when you tell a great joke, I might say “You kill me!” but in that case the verb has a positive, not a negative connotation.

When we encounter the English word *forgive*, however, we know within rough limits what is meant, without needing to pay a great deal of attention to context. Unfortunately, no single understanding, no single Hebrew or Greek term, encompasses all biblical statements related to what we call *forgiveness*. Forgiveness is not in itself a “thing” about which scripture speaks. Hundreds of passages in the English Bible use the translation *forgive* or *pardon* or something similar solely because context demands it. With one major exception, most biblical words—Hebrew or Greek, Old or New Testament—that might be rendered in English as *pardon* or *forgive* or *forgiveness* have multiple meanings that often look nothing like what we think of when we speak of forgiving someone. Scholars must look at the context of a Hebrew or Greek sentence to decide whether to translate these various words as *forgive* or as something quite different.

I want to explore what biblical writers appear to have meant when they used Hebrew or Greek words whose context has led English translators to choose the word *forgive* or something similar. After that we will ask, “How does that scholarly knowledge relate to spiritual truth? What eternal realities underlie the intellectual concept that we call forgiveness?”

Texts on forgiveness

There are two primary Hebrew words that, judging from context, can imply something akin to what we think of when we use the word forgiveness, and therefore are appropriately translated that way in English Bibles. A third Hebrew word also qualifies— it's the word כִּפֶּר/*kipper*, generally translated as “atone for”; but since the connotations of that term differ somewhat from those of our two primary Hebrew words, and because delving into the nuances of this third Hebrew word would add nothing significant to our discussion, I will address only the two Hebrew words that are, in most cases, quite appropriately translated as *forgive* or *forgiveness* in the Old Testament.

חָלַח/*salah*

The first Hebrew word, חָלַח/*salah*, is the exception to what I said about these Hebrew or Greek words' having multiple meanings. Every time חָלַח/*salah* is used in the Hebrew Bible, it clearly means something like *forgive*. Some examples:

NRS Exodus 34:9 [Moses] said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

In Leviticus, a plethora of passages read almost exactly like the following: “The priest shall make atonement on a person’s behalf, and that person shall be forgiven.”

II Chronicles 7:14 If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Psalms 103:2-3 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.

Isaiah 55:7 ... let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

נָסַח/*salah* appears 45 times in the Old Testament, and every instance means, approximately, *forgive* or *pardon*. That’s the easy word.

נָסָא/*nasa'*

The other Hebrew word translated appropriately as *forgive* is נָסָא/*nasa'*. This term is complicated, because out of the 513 times it appears in the Hebrew Bible, context suggests that only 30 times—about 6%—does it mean something like *forgive*.

The basic meaning of נָסָא/*nasa'* is to *carry* or *lift up* or *bear*. This is what it tends to mean in those approximately 480 cases where the word clearly has nothing to do with forgiveness. Examples:

*In Genesis 7, the waters “bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth.”

*In Exodus 10 the wind lifted the locusts and drove them into the sea.

*Dozens of passages talk of priests carrying the ark of the covenant using its poles.

*Dozens of passages use the idiom “to lift up one’s eyes”; we see this, for example, in Genesis 18:2 when Abraham looks up and sees three men approaching—the Hebrew is literally, he “lifted up his eyes.”

*The lepers in II Kings 7 carried off silver, gold, and clothing from the Syrian military encampment.

*In Isaiah 40 we read that “every valley shall be lifted up.”

*Isaiah 60 says that camels from many countries will carry gold and frankincense to Zion to honor Yahweh.

Here are a few of those passages where $\kappa\upsilon\lambda\omicron$ /*nasa*' means something like *forgive*:

NRS Genesis 18:26 And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.”

NRS Genesis 50:17 “... ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him.

NRS Exodus 34:7 ... keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty...

NRS Psalm 25:18 Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

NRS Psalm 32:1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

In many places throughout Leviticus we are told a person who has done bad things will “carry/bear his [own] evil/guilt/punishment/sins.” A few examples:

RSV Leviticus 5:1 If any one sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify and though he is a witness... yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity.

RSV Leviticus 5:17 If any one sins, doing any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.

RSV Leviticus 19:8 (concerning a person who eats a peace offering on or after the third day on which it was sacrificed, which is forbidden) ... and every one who eats it shall bear his iniquity...

The same language spills over into the vocabulary of atonement:

RSV Leviticus 10:17 (addressing the priests who had not correctly followed the law) **Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD?**

We see in this case, as well as the passage immediately below, that one person can *bear* or *carry* the sin of another—a highly significant concept!

RSV Leviticus 16:22 (concerning the so-called “scapegoat” on the Day of Atonement) **The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land...**

As you may have guessed, נָסָא/*nasa'* is the verb used in Isaiah 53 when we are told concerning the Servant of Yahweh that...

NRS Isaiah 53:4 **Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases...** [A better translation might be that he has borne our sicknesses and carried our sorrows.]

Note that in 53:4 the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was the Bible of the early church) reads (contrary to the Hebrew), “He has borne our sins...” That version would have been foremost in the minds of New Testament Christians. Even more significantly:

NRS Isaiah 53:12 **... he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.**

Finally, note this significant statement in Numbers 14:19, where traditional Hebrew parallelism shows that both Hebrew verbs, סָלַח/*salah* and נָסָא/*nasa'* were essentially equivalent in the mind of the writer:

[trans BCM] **Numbers 14:19** **Forgive** (אָפַחַד) **the evil of this people according to the greatness of your love, just as you have forgiven** (הִתְאַפַּחַד) **this people from Egypt until today.**

The first forgive was אָפַחַד/**salah**, the second was הִתְאַפַּחַד/**nasa'**.

Overall theology of forgiveness in the Old Testament

Even though אָפַחַד/**salah** is more commonly used to directly indicate the concept of forgiveness, if we add to the tally those passages in Leviticus that use הִתְאַפַּחַד/**nasa'** to refer to the bearing of sin/evil/guilt/punishment, and if we take note of the statement in Numbers 14:19 where אָפַחַד/**salah** and הִתְאַפַּחַד/**nasa'** are used as semi-synonyms, we can present an overview of the basic concept of forgiveness in the Old Testament. It must be emphasized that *there is no single theology of forgiveness* or of most other concepts, because the Old Testament was written over many centuries. But I think a comprehensive picture emerges that stands in rather stark contrast to traditional beliefs that have prevailed since the early centuries of the Christian era—when, thanks to influential writers such as Augustine, Christians began to think more in Roman and Greek cultural terms than in biblical concepts.

Christians traditionally have thought of forgiveness in a judicial context. When I sin against you, your forgiving me means that you declare me not guilty, or perhaps not subject to punishment. You *acquitt* me, as in a court of law. This kind of thinking comes ultimately from Roman thought in the early centuries of the Christian era. Christians focus a lot on guilt, or on being declared not guilty. We tend to picture God as a judge in a court of law.

The Old Testament viewpoint was different. If I sin, that means I have done something destructive, something that causes hurt or pain or injury to another human or to God. Forgiveness is not so much a question of declaring me not guilty or not condemned. Rather, it's an acknowledgement that I have caused harm, created a burden—or, to use a very helpful vocabulary, I have incurred a debt. In the minds of most contemporary evangelical Christians, forgiveness means that my debt is cancelled; I am declared not

guilty. But in the Old Testament, that's only part of the story. Someone must *pay* that debt! If you forgive me of something I have done to you, of the debt I have incurred toward you, you are saying that you will *bear* or *carry* the cost.

The dominant idea is *bearing*, not *adjudicating* or *pronouncing sentence*. Sin is always costly. If you forgive my sin, you are saying that you will incur and pay for my debt, you will bear the burden that my evil actions have created.

In one sense, the Hebrew verb נָסָא/*nasa'* is used almost exactly like the English word *forgive*: It can refer to the sin or to the sinner. In English, we speak of forgiving sin as well as forgiving the sinner. The Hebrew is the same, since נָסָא/*nasa'* sometimes refers to the *offense*, sometimes to the *offender*, and sometimes to both in the same sentence. If I have wronged you, I have diminished you, I have incurred a debt to you. You may decide to carry or bear *my sin*, and at the same time to carry or bear *me*.

Note that a third party can do the bearing or carrying. Remember the common language in Leviticus about people *carrying their sin*? And there's the reminder in Isaiah that the Servant of Yahweh will *carry the sin* of many people. The Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable *carried* or *bore* the stranger's debt, paying all that was necessary out of his own pocket—and he even carried the individual, literally, to a place of refuge.

Knowing the background concepts from the Old Testament, we can more easily appreciate New Testament passages such as

RSV 1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

RSV Hebrews 9:28 ... Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

The Greek verb used in both these New Testament statements is the standard word for *carry*; and as you might guess, it is the word used in the Greek translation of נָסָא/*nasa'* in Isaiah 53:12, describing how the Servant of Yahweh *carried* the sins of many.

Important passages ~ **ἀναφέρω/anaphero**, which typically means carry (cf. Leviticus passim, Is. 53:4, Is. 53:12)

- ^{RSV} **Numbers 14:33** And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and shall suffer for [carry, bear] your **faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.**

וּבְנֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ רֹעִים בַּמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וְנִשְׂאוּ אֶת־זְנוּתֵיכֶם עַד־תָּם פְּגָרֵיכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר:

οἱ δὲ υἱοὶ ὑμῶν ἔσονται νεμόμενοι ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη καὶ **ἀνοίσουσιν** [future 3rd-person plural of ἀναφέρω/anaphero] τὴν πορνείαν ὑμῶν ἕως ἂν ἀναλωθῇ τα κῶλα ὑμῶν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ

^{RSV} **Isaiah 53:11** he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear [יִסְבֹּל/sabal] their iniquities.

מֵעַמְל נִפְשׁוֹ יִרְאֶה יִשְׁבֹּעַ בְּדַעְתּוֹ יִצְדִּיק צְדִיק עַבְדִּי לְרַבִּים וְעֹנְתָם הוּא יִסְבֹּל

[יִסְבֹּל/sabal is another word for bear or carry]

ἀπὸ τοῦ πόνου τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ δεῖξαι αὐτῷ φῶς καὶ πλάσαι τῇ συνέσει δικαιοῦσαι δίκαιον εὖ δουλεύοντα πολλοῖς καὶ τας ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν αὐτος **ἀνοίσει** [ἀνοίσει – indicative future active 3rd person singular of ἀναφέρω]

In understanding God's forgiving our sins, I believe it's appropriate to focus on the fact that *we created destruction and pain through our actions*; and to understand that *God chooses to carry, to bear the cost and pain and consequences of those sins*. Forgiving certainly includes something on the order of judicial acquittal, but the broader concept is one of God's deciding to *bear* the consequences of our sin himself. It's less a courtroom scene with a judge declaring guilt or acquittal, and more a street encounter where Someone sees the destruction and pain we have wrought, and says, "I'll pay for it all, however much it costs; and I'll carry these guys to a place of refuge and healing."

To continue reading about biblical concepts of forgiveness, please see *Forgiveness in the Bible—New Testament* (<https://breakingandentering.org/forgiveness-in-the-bible-new-testament/>).