Research article

AN UNDERSTANDING OF FORGIVENESS IN HEBREW WORLDVIEW

N. Varun Deepak

Research Scholar, Department For Advanced Theological Studies, Sam Higgin Bottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences

Email: varun4christ@gmail.com

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This paper explores the Hebrew worldview on forgiveness. The paper explores several terms used in the Old Testament Scriptures. In addition, an attempt has been made to dive into Rabbinical understanding on forgiveness. The aim of the paper is to examine the values and priorities of the Jewish world in relation to forgiveness and repentance.

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1. The Jewish Worldview on Forgiveness

In contrast to the Greek and Roman society, Jewish faith is monotheistic with belief in the creator God *Yahweh*. The rich source of Jewish culture and patterns of Jewish behavior and beliefs were derived from *Yahweh* who is actively involved in guiding, sustaining and leading the people of Israel as a people of covenant to exhibit *Yahweh* to the other nations.

1.1 The Divine Forgiveness: The Old Testament Texts

Antony Bash in his influential essay *Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Spirituality: A Theological Perspective* writes that in the ancient Jewish tradition in the ancient Near East before the Christian era believed that forgiveness is granted by the God of Israel, Yahweh to the people of Israel who are within the covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Bash argues that “Divine forgiveness has to do with preservation of the fundamental covenant relationship of Yahweh and Yahweh’s people”¹  

David Konstan in his scholarly essay *Divine Absolution* in the book *Before Forgiveness* compares the Greek novels and literature with Jewish Old Testament and argues that the need for forgiveness emerges only with the acknowledgement of sin “where there is no sin there is no place for forgiveness and it is unsurprising that the complex of confession, remorse and change of heart or conversion is absent from the novels in stark contrast to the story of Adam and Eve where these motives are central to the narrative”²  

In agreement with David Konstan, Michael Morgan in his influential essay *Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness in Ancient Judaism* writes God as the lawgiver considers sin as the transgression of divine law. The normative response of God to sin, rebellion and disobedience of mankind is anger and retribution. Yet, the same God is Just; compassionate and merciful to the people of Israel as they are his “children and subjects”³.

1.1.1 Understanding Divine Mercy in relation to Anger and Forgiveness

Exploring Old Testament texts in his essay to understand God’s mercy and forgiveness, Morgan focusing on Exodus 34:6-7 “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and

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² David Konstan, “Divine Absolution The Hebrew and Christian Bibles” *Before Forgiveness*
forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation”, a verse which comes after the Golden calf episode, followed by the breaking of the ten commandment tablets by Moses. Morgan argues God’s mercy is expressed as forgiveness of sin that is an act of pardoning the sin that is, cancelling the punishment. Morgan based his argument on the fact that, God responded to Moses’ plea to forgive the stiff necked people (verse 8-9) by making covenant. Morgan argues that by rejecting punishment and abandoning, God expressed his divine mercy by an act of pardon which involves “God overcoming his anger with a rebellious people and foregoing punishment in favor of his remembering the promises he had made…” For Morgan, Divine mercy or compassion is “God’s disposition to overcome his fury”.

The researcher disagrees with Morgan’s position for three reasons. First, the context of Golden calf episode does not serve the example to relinquish of God’s anger rather it brings legitimacy to God’s anger. God has certainly visited and struck the sin of his people with a plague for what they did with the calf Aaron had made (Exodus 32:35). Second, the researcher argues that God’s mercy or compassion must not be understood as means to overcome God’s anger rather, God’s mercy and compassion must be understood in his commitment and faithfulness to continue his covenant with the stiff necked people by remembering the promises made to the patriarchs, as the researcher finds plenty of scriptures related to God’s anger towards his people, whenever they sinned. The context of Golden calf records the verse: The Lord replied to Moses “whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (Exodus 32:33). This decision of God comes in response to Moses’ plea to forgive the sin of Israel or else blot out his name from the book. The researcher finds, this verse, legitimizes God’s anger and punishment. Thirdly, the researcher argues that God’s mercy or compassion does not support the idea of removal of punishment when his people committed sin, as the researcher finds plenty of scriptures where God punished the sin of his people through sword, plagues, famine and wild animals. In addition to the above, the researcher finds that the Golden calf episode also serves as an example to the legitimacy of

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human anger in terms of Moses’ reaction to the people of Israel. Therefore the idea that divine mercy and compassion serves as an agent to cease God’s anger and punishment does not stand, also, the researcher argues that God’s forgiveness does not mean overruling or abandoning punishment for the sin. For the researcher argues that God’s forgiveness has to be understood in the light of his faithfulness, willingness and patience to continue his covenant and fulfill his eternal purposes with the rebellious and stiff necked Israel without compromising on his holiness or their sin. Thus, the researcher agrees with the position of Antony Bash.

1.1.1.2 Understanding Divine Mercy in relation to Repentance

Exploring further on God’s mercy, Morgan moves on to a passage in Jeremiah, where God charges Jeremiah to proclaim “Return faithless Israel, declares the Lord, I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful declares the Lord, I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt you have rebelled against the Lord your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree and have not obeyed me” (Jeremiah 3:12-13). Morgan argues that the mercy of God and his eagerness to forgive can be accomplished only if the people acknowledge their sin and return to him.7 Morgan further moves to the book of Jonah and writes that God’s mercy extends towards other nations and argues that “Divine mercy responds to repentance and remorse and change of heart and it does so by mitigating or cancelling punishment”8 The researcher agrees with Morgan to the argument that divine mercy responds to repentance or remorse, but does not agree to the idea that divine mercy cancels punishment every time as argued above.

David Konstan in his scholarly essay Assuaging Rage strongly argues that repentance, remorse or moral transformation is the unique and distinct contribution of Judaism to the world.9 To drive this point David extensively compares Greek novel stories with the Judeo-Christian text in his book Before Forgiveness where the story of Adam and Eve recorded as The Life of Adam and Eve recorded under the title The Apocalypse of Moses. The story records the repentance of Eve, while Adam was at his death bed, explaining the origin of the curse of death. In response to Eve’s cry to give half of Adams’s sickness to her because the

entire curse happened because of her. David points to Adam’s instruction to Eve “…seek out to paradise together with Seth..Weep and beg God to have pity”\textsuperscript{10} In response to Adam’ instruction, writes David, Eve fell to the ground saying “I have sinned God, I have sinned. Father of all I have sinned against you…I have against your unshakable throne. I have sinned before you and all sin in creation has arisen through me”\textsuperscript{11} At this point, writes David that Angel says “Arise Eve from your repentance \textit{(metanoias sou)}. Adam is now dead” and grants her a vision of Chariot taking Adam to the third heaven. David argues that by insisting upon her own fault, “Eve was remorseful that she was deceived by the serpent serves not as an excuse for her sin but rather as a sign that she has now perceived her error and has repented of it”\textsuperscript{12} David further argues that this realization and acknowledgement of the culpability of Adam and Eve has led God to show mercy, as the condition of repentance, a change of heart, was fulfilled on both sides, on the part of God who expelled the couple from paradise and on the part of Adam and Eve.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, David concludes, in the light of Greek and Roman literature, that the greatest and unique contribution of Judaism was the necessity of remorse, repentance and confession which must lead mankind to a change of heart. The researcher fully agrees with David because sin is better affirmed and understood in the light of God, who decides right and wrong through his laws and commands. In similar manner, forgiveness is understood as: Divine Forgiveness, as God alone is capable to forgive. The researcher finds this interesting story as, a powerful way to drive the importance and the supremacy of repentance in Jewish worldview, which precedes forgiveness. The researcher fully agrees with Konstan.

1.1.1.3 Understanding Divine Forgiveness in Intentional and Unintentional Cases

David Konstan, in his book \textit{Before Forgiveness} explores the Old Testament passages, to understand God’s actions in terms of intentional and unintentional cases. The researcher finds that the understanding and usage of the term \textit{Salakh and Nasa} in Hebrew texts is important to understand divine forgiveness.

\textsuperscript{10} David Konstan, “Divine Absolution: The Hebrew and Christian Bibles” \textit{Before Forgiveness}
\textsuperscript{11} David Konstan, “Divine Absolution: The Hebrew and Christian Bibles” \textit{Before Forgiveness}
\textsuperscript{12} David Konstan, “Divine Absolution: The Hebrew and Christian Bibles”
\textsuperscript{13} David Konstan, “Divine Absolution: The Hebrew and Christian Bibles”
1.1.1.3.1 The Term *Salakh*

Konstan classifies the passage Leviticus 4:13-20 under unintentional case. Konstan observes that the term employed for *forgive* in the passage comes from the root word *salakh* which means in Hebrew Bible, only God is the subject of this verb. Konstan argues that because the offense is apparently committed in ignorance, “it is not a matter of forgiving deliberate or voluntary wrongdoing”\(^{14}\) Konstan sees the sacrifice of the bull and other ritual procedure as a kind of compensation due for the trespass, irrespective of intention. In cases of conscious wrong doing, basing on Lev 6:1-13/ 5:14-26/Lev 19:20-22, Konstan argues that it requires more than just ritual atonement, “a must compensation for the one who has been deceived or harmed”\(^{15}\) Referring further to Lev 15:30-31: But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the Lord’s word and broken his commands they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them, Konstan strongly affirms that “there is no tolerance for deliberate offenses”\(^{16}\)

Referring further to the incident of murmuring of Israelites in the wilderness recorded in Num 14:17-20, Konstan examines the plea of Moses to grant pardon (*salakh*) Israelites and God’s response that none of those who put him to test and disobeyed after seeing all the wonders and signs in Egypt will enter the Promised Land. Konstan argues that though God grants pardon in general to the people of Israel, the guilty will never go unpunished.\(^{17}\) Further Konstan points to the denial of *Salakh* to those who pledge allegiance to idol worship and gods of other nations as recorded in Deut 29:18-20: Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations…The Lord will never be willing to forgive (*salakh*) them; his wrath and zeal will burn against them. For Konstan drifting away or falling away from faith is conceived to be unpardonable.\(^{18}\) Examining further the prayer of Solomon I kings 8:30-32, where Solomon prays for Israel and asks God to forgive (*salakh*) and when people wrong their neighbors, Solomon prays that God would judge between the people and

\(^{15}\) David Konstan, “Divine Absolution” 91-124.
\(^{16}\) David Konstan, “Divine Absolution” 91-124.
\(^{17}\) David Konstan, “Divine Absolution” 91-124.
condemn the guilty, bringing down on their head what they have done and vindicating the innocent. According to Konstan, Solomon does not pray for mercy for those who committed wrong, rather consideration for those who are innocent. For Konstan argues “sin in the Jewish literature is understood as against God, not against individual or another group”

In examining all these Old Testament texts, Konstan’s important argument is “for the focus on the Jewish people’s relationship to God not only has the consequence that it is for the most part God who forgives, rather than human beings, also the kind of offense that requires forgiveness is a generalized rejection of the Lord as opposed to particular wrongs committed against a fellow being” In agreement with Konstan, Chong Hyong Sung argues after surveying of forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels “sin is the violation of God’s law and is thus understood as a breach of justice” Taking the argument further, Morgan argues that since the biblical God is the lawgiver and sin is transgression of divine law, which dictates relations among human beings as well as between man and God, “the primary victim is of wrong. One who is wronged and the one with whom relationship has been breached by the wrong is God” In addition Morgan explicitly states that there no specific laws or statues in the Biblical codes, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy that commands forgiveness. The researcher fully agrees with Konstan, Hyong and Morgan and concludes that Inter personal forgiveness was neither a matter of consideration nor was the ancient Jews aware of it.

1.1.1.3.2 The Term Nasa

The researcher finds that the term nasa implies God as the forgiver, has been used in the context of Joseph and his brothers. Though Joseph’s brothers threw themselves on Joseph’s feet out of fear, asking to forgive, yet, Joseph counter questions them: Am I in the place of God? Morgan argues that for Joseph seems to belief that “all that transpired was a matter of Divine providence, and it was not his brothers who were ultimately responsible for having sold him into slavery but rather God” Morgan observes that Joseph sees everything

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that happened and all were “instruments of Divine will”\textsuperscript{25} Besides Morgan writes that Joseph’s brothers sent the message to forgive, but they did not request forgiveness directly. Johansson in his wonderful book \textit{Who can Forgive Sins but God Alone? Human and Angelic Agents, and Divine Forgiveness in Early Judaism} argues that Joseph declined to forgive his brothers, because in Joseph’s mind was a gift of God.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, the researcher finds that both the terms \textit{Salakh} and \textit{Nasa} point to God as the forgiver and it is evident that ancient Jews never considered inter personal forgiveness as a matter of importance.

1.1.2 Rabbinical Literature and Inter Personal Forgiveness

Michael in his scholarly essay \textit{Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness in Ancient Forgiveness} explores the rabbinic literature to investigate on inter personal forgiveness. The researcher now focuses on ancient rabbinical literature.

1.1.2.1 The Babylonian Talmud

According to Michael, a text that seems to come closer to the sense of forgiveness as a change of heart regarding a person who has done wrong, without excusing the culpability or reducing the punishment occurs in Babylonian Talmud at Mishnah Baba Kamma, based on the episode between Abraham and Abimelek recorded in Genesis 20. The story is about Abimelek taking Abraham’s wife, as Abraham introduces her as sister to Abimelek. Followed by God’s intervention in dream to Abimelek commanding to return Sarah to Abraham and Abimelek assembles all his officials the next day and returns Sarah to Abraham along with cattle, male and female slaves. The first thing the researcher finds, The Babylonian Talmud says “Even though he (the perpetrator) pays (monetary compensation) to (the victim of his insult), he is not forgiven until he requests (explicitly forgiveness) from him (whom he has insulted)”\textsuperscript{27}. The researcher finds this quite remarkable as the victim is provided with monetary compensation; in addition the perpetrator is also expected to request forgiveness from the victim. Michael argues that the rabbinical commentators understood that forgiveness does not excuse sin or cancel the punishment, what elicits forgiveness from the victim is a

\textsuperscript{25} Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness in Ancient Judaism”, 137-157.
\textsuperscript{27} Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
request for forgiveness, identified with repentance and the victim must not withhold forgiveness.  

The second important thing that the researcher finds, according to Michael, “throughout the biblical and rabbinical texts that deal with sin, repentance, forgiveness and pardon, the burden of responsibility to take the first step to mend the relationships falls on the perpetrator, which means the responsibility of the sinner” Michael further writes that, “in rabbinic literature, human nature is marked by a motive impulse, a drive or a tendency, which can be turned to good or ill” Thus Michael argues “the perpetrator is also capable of acknowledging his sin, returning to an attitude of loyalty and devotion and committing to a life according to the law” The researcher finds the Babylonian Talmud very relevant, as it emphasizes the importance of providing compensation to the victim, and perpetrator requesting forgiveness. The researcher opines that such request can happen only when there is genuine remorse and repentance for the crime. In addition the researcher sees, that laying the responsibility on the perpetrator to beseech forgiveness and to mend relationships, as a healthy sign, as it primarily sets the victim free from the pressure, force and burden to forgive the perpetrator, as seen in the previous chapter regarding TRC in South Africa and other examples, rather gives room to the victim to wait until the perpetrator returns with a genuine remorse. Michael concludes by saying “the critical choice is the sinner’s, not the victims’ and the ultimate response is God’s” 

1.1.2.2 The Tosefta Baba Kamma

In contrast to the Mishna Baba Kamma, the researcher finds the Tosefta Baba Kamma takes a different position by interpreting the Abraham Abimelech story differently. While the Mishna as observed above affirms compensation to Abraham, repentance and requesting forgiveness by Abimelech, the Tosefta reads the text as Abimelek did not ask Abraham to seek mercy from God. It was Abraham who did so, on his own volition. Thus the researcher finds that Tosefta says “even if the sinner does not ask for forgiveness, the victim should still ask for

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28 Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
29 Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
30 Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
31 Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
32 Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
In this juncture, the researcher finds the argument of Judith Hauptman very enlightening. Hauptman in his brilliant work *Rereading the Mishna: A New Approach to Ancient Jewish Texts* argues that while one text assumes that Abimelek did ask for mercy, while the other assumes Abimelek did not ask, in either case “Abraham, the human victim acts as a mediator between the sinner and God”34 Judith further argues that “interpersonal sin and forgiveness occurs within background frame work of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel”35 While the focus is on Abimelek and God, argues Judith, Abraham is just a link, not the primary focus of attention. Thus Hauptman drives the point that if the divine-human relationship has to be healed, it must depend upon the person responsible for the breach and God. The researcher finds the argument of Judith very healthy and it brings a great sense to the rebuilding of a post-conflict society and above all provides the opportunity for the perpetrators to set right things, with a commitment to a change of heart and attitude for the divine mercy to be activated. Therefore the researcher understands that in rabbinic literature, the role of human victim is simply less fundamental than that of the repentant sinner.

1.1.2.3 Tractate Yoma of the Talmud

Examining the Tractate Yoma of the Talmud, Michael writes that it richly deals with repentance and the Day of Atonement, where purification, atonement and reconciliation were heavily emphasized in accordance with the rituals of fasting, cessation of work, sacrifices and ritual purgation (Lev 16/ Exodus 30:10/ Lev 23:27-31/ 25:9). According to the Mishna elaborate rituals were conducted in the temple that deals with repentance. Michael argues that “the thrust of the text is that the ritual practices of Yom Kippur are a vital part of the process of reconciliation, when repentance is sufficient”36 On the other hand, according to Michael, for serious transgressions, rituals are also necessary along with repentance and until the rituals occur, the punishment for the transgression is withheld. For Michael, these ritual practices are an expression of God’s purification and his confirmation of the reconciliation with the sinner.

33 Michael L. Morgan, “Mercy, Repentance and Forgiveness”
35 Judith Hauptman, 154-156.
36 Michael L. Morgan,
However, Michael poses important questions: as these patterns suit the transgressions between God and man, what about interpersonal transgressions? Is human victim of harm and injury being ignored? With much deeper probe into the Talmud, Michael points to the Mishna for answers, which says “For a transgression done between a person and God, the Day of Atonement atones (provides purification i.e seals the reconciliation). For transgressions between one person and another, the Day of Atonement atones, only if the first one appeases [y’ratzeḥ, compensates] the other. According to Rabbi Elazar ben Azryah states: From all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord (Lev 16:30)-for transgressions between person and God, the Day of Atonement atones. For transgressions between one person and another, the Day of Atonement atones, only if the first one appeases the other”\(^\text{37}\) Therefore the researcher finds that interpersonal forgiveness in the rabbinic literature has the process: First, the perpetrator compensating the victim. Second, the perpetrator must approach the victim in complete repentance and request the victim for forgiveness before the rituals of the Day of Atonement and Yon Kippur. Third, they believed that before God is called to act mercifully and erase the punishment due the wrongdoer, the victim must be compensated. For God is appeased with the repentance and compensation of the perpetrator. Thus, the researcher as argued in the earlier chapter for conditional forgiveness finds strength and affirmation in the rabbinical literature.

Considering all the rabbinic literature, Michael writes that repentance can work with God only when the human victim has already been compensated. For Michael, compensation is part of the act of repentance. For the emphasis, writes Michael, in rabbinic literature is highly on repentance.\(^\text{38}\) According to Rabbi Chama bar Chanina “Great is repentance for it brings healing to the world”\(^\text{39}\) The researcher is strongly convinced that the greatest contribution of Judaism is repentance, and fully agrees with Michael’s argument and observations, for it believes that the repentance of one person brings healing, purification to the whole world.

\(^{37}\) Michael L.Morgan
\(^{38}\) Michael L.Morgan, 137-157.
\(^{39}\) Michael L.Morgan, 137-157.
Conclusion

To wind up the Jewish worldview, the researcher finds that, while the Greeks raged with honor and blood justice, without pity and the Romans struggled with the moderation of anger on the other hand, the Jewish worldview introduced the concept of repentance making man responsible, more accountable and above all more human, towards man and towards God, for every evil or crime committed over another human. The researcher finds that Jewish worldview has shown what it means to be a human, in the midst of fallacies and failures of other worldviews.

Bibliography


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