

## ἄφεσις In The New Testament And Its Suggested Links To The Biblical Jubilee

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### Abstract

This study responds to the claims that the term ἄφεσις (usually translated “forgiveness”) should be understood in light of the biblical Jubilee. The study commences with a brief survey of the word’s use in the Septuagint and Classical Greek literature, alongwith the related verb ἀφίημι. It then examines each use of ἄφεσις in the New Testament. Texts in Matthew, Mark, Luke-Acts, Paul’s writings and Hebrews are examined, with a particular focus on Lucan texts (since these contain the majority of the occurrences of the word). The study concludes that the verb ἀφίημι was never explicitly connected to the Jubilee in the Septuagint, so there is no reason to view the word in this light in the New Testament. The study also concludes that even though the term ἄφεσις had Jubilee connotations at the time the Septuagint was written, there was significant semantic development such that by the time of the New Testament, the word had a distinct and unambiguous meaning, centred on the forgiveness of sins and unrelated to the Jubilee.

Keywords: ἄφεσις, aphasis, ἀφίημι, aphiēmi, Jubilee, Luke-Acts, forgiveness

### Abstrak

Artikel ini merespons kepada klaim bahwa istilah ἄφεσις (biasanya diterjemahkan “pengampunan”) seharusnya dipahami dalam terang tahun Yobel Alkitabiah. Artikel ini mulai dengan survei mengenai penggunaan kata ἀφίημι tersebut dalam Septuaginta dan sastra Yunani kuno, bersama dengan survei tentang kata kerja ἀφίημι (yang berkaitan dengan kata ἄφεσις). Selanjutnya analisis pemakaian kata ἄφεσις dalam Perjanjian Baru. Teks dalam kitab Matius, Markus, Lukas-Kisah Para Rasul, tulisan Paulus, dan kitab Ibrani dianalisis dengan fokus khusus kepada tulisan Lukas (karena tulisan tersebut mengandung sebagian besar kejadian kata tersebut). Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa kata kerja ἀφίημι tidak pernah berhubungan secara eksplisit dengan Yobel dalam Septuaginta, sehingga tidak ada alasan untuk memandang kata *aphiēmi* dalam terang Perjanjian Baru. Artikel ini juga menyimpulkan bahwa

meskipun istilah ἄφεσις memiliki konotasi Yobel pada waktu Septuaginta ditulis, ada perkembangan semantik yang besar, supaya ketika Perjanjian Baru ditulis, kata tersebut memiliki arti yang berbeda dan jelas, berpusat pengampunan dosa, dan tidak berkaitan dengan tahun Yobel.

Kata-kata kunci: ἄφεσις, aphasis, ἀφίημι, aphīēmi, Yobel, Lukas-Kisah Para Rasul, pengampunan

## Introduction

Since its inception in ancient Israel, the biblical Jubilee (the provisions of which are detailed in Leviticus 25:8-55; 27:16-25 and Numbers 23:4) has undergone a wide range of interpretations at various times and places throughout history.<sup>1</sup> These interpretations have, at times, exercised a profound level of influence on Jews, Christians and others, and its influence continues in the modern era. Since the 1960s in particular, there has been an increasing focus on the Jubilee, particularly in regard to how Jubilee practices and principles can be applied to current contexts.<sup>2</sup> This renewed interest has been accompanied by a significant body of research addressing the theological, historical and socio-economic aspects of the Jubilee in the Old Testament texts, Second Temple literature and Qumran documents, and the New Testament texts.

In regard to these New Testament texts, one of the reasons why some scholars see Jubilee references in the New Testament (and particularly in Luke-Acts) is because of the use of the word ἄφεσις and the related verb ἀφίημι.<sup>3</sup> Ἄφεσις in particular has strong literary links

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<sup>1</sup> See Christopher J. Luthy, "Rethinking the Acceptable Year: The Jubilee and the *Basileia* in Luke 4 and Beyond" (PhD diss., University of Divinity, 2019), 293-308. The present study reproduces some of the findings of this dissertation (particularly the section Ἄφεσις and Ἀφίημι in Luke), though the focus of this paper is widened to assess the use of ἄφεσις throughout the entire New Testament.

<sup>2</sup> In 1961, André Trocmé wrote what would later be translated as *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution* which would prove to have a profound effect on Jubilee interpretation, mainly because it was popularised by John Howard Yoder in his work *The Politics of Jesus*. Yoder argued that Jesus' sermon at Nazareth in Luke 4 was in fact a call for the implementation of an actual Jubilee year. See John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 32-33. The publication of Yoder's work profoundly influenced many Lucan scholars, who now argue in favour of Jubilean language/imagery in Luke-Acts.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts*, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series* 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 222-23; B. J. Koet, *Five Studies on Interpretation of Scripture in Luke-Acts*, *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Auxilia* 14 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 33-35 and Sharon H. Ringe, "The Jubilee Proclamation in the Ministry and

with the Jubilee throughout the Septuagint (see below), which has led some scholars to argue that passages such as Luke 4:18, where Luke uses ἄφεσις twice as part of a quotation from Isaiah, is evidence of a reference to the biblical Jubilee.<sup>4</sup> Sloan, for example, argues that “the retention and use of ἄφεσις and its related forms by Luke suggests the rather consistent influence of the jubilar message”.<sup>5</sup>

The premise of this paper, however, is that in the New Testament, ἄφεσις does not need to be read as carrying any Jubilar undertones. Instead, it is suggested that the semantic development of the word dissociated it from the Jubilee by the time of the first century. The study briefly surveys the use of both ἄφεσις and ἀφίημι in the Septuagint and classical literature, before a more detailed examination of ἄφεσις in the New Testament. Particular emphasis is given to Luke-Acts, which contains 10 of the 17 occurrences of ἄφεσις.

## The Septuagint and Classical Greek Literature

It is clear that throughout the course of the Septuagint, ἄφεσις is frequently related to the Jubilee. Of the forty-nine times that ἄφεσις is used, it is connected to the Jubilee at least twenty-three times.<sup>6</sup> It is also used in relation to Sabbath years on at least eight occasions.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there are only ten occasions when it is clear that ἄφεσις is not used in relation to the Jubilee or Sabbath years.<sup>8</sup> Within the Septuagint, ἄφεσις is used to translate יִרְבֵּל (“ram’s horn” or “a year of release” which was inaugurated by the blowing of a ram’s horn) in Lev 25 and 27, הַטְּמָן or טְמָן (“remission”/“to release” or “to remit”) in Exod 23:11, Deut 15:1 and 31:10, and דְּרוֹר (“emancipation,” particularly in relation to slaves) in Lev

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Teaching of Jesus: A Tradition-Critical Study in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1981), 219-20.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Bruno, “‘Jesus Is Our Jubilee’ ... But How? The OT Background and Lukan Fulfillment of the Ethics of Jubilee,” *JETS* 53, no. 1 (March 2010): 96; Ringe, 215-20; Koet, 31-32 and Robert B. Sloan, *The Favorable Year of the Lord: A Study of Jubilar Theology in the Gospel of Luke* (Austin: Scholars Press, 1977), 118-21.

<sup>5</sup> Sloan, 118.

<sup>6</sup> Lev 25:10 (twice), 11, 12, 13, 28 (twice), 30, 31, 33, 40, 41, 50, 52, 54; 27:17, 18 (twice), 21, 23, 24; Num 36:4; Isa 61:1. There are also seven other occasions when ἄφεσις is used in a way which may be a reference to the Jubilee, though this is not certain (Isa 58:6; Jer 34:8, 25, 17 (twice), Ezek 46:17; Dan 12:7).

<sup>7</sup> Exod 23:11; Deut 15:1, 2 (twice), 3, 9; 31:10; 1 Macc 10:34.

<sup>8</sup> Exod 18:2; 2 Sam 22:16; 1 Esd 4:62; Esth 2:18; Jdt 11:14; 1 Mac 13:34; Joel 1:20, 4:18; Lam 3:48; Ezek 47:3.

25:10, Isa 61:1 and Jer 34:8.<sup>9</sup> It is only used once as a reference to “forgiveness” (Lev 16:26).<sup>10</sup>

Ἀφίημι, on the other hand, appears one hundred and thirty-three times throughout the Septuagint, and is *never* explicitly used in relation to the Jubilee and only once in connection with the Sabbath year (Deut 15:2).<sup>11</sup> The word is used for a range of Hebrew words to denote a) “release/surrender” and “leave in peace” or b) “remission”/“forgiveness”<sup>12</sup> When used in terms of “remission”/“forgiveness” (over twenty times) the object is sin or guilt (usually ἁμαρτία, though also ἄνομία, ἀσέβεια and αἰτία) and God is the agent.<sup>13</sup>

In classical Greek literature, ἄφεσις and ἀφίημι referred to a person’s release, usually from an office, marriage, obligation, or debt.<sup>14</sup> Both words were used in the context of human relationships – they were not used in a religious sense.<sup>15</sup> By the time of Philo and Josephus, however, ἄφεσις was commonly used to mean “liberty” or “acquittal,” particularly in relation to the remission of sins.<sup>16</sup>

### Ἄφεσις in the New Testament

In the New Testament, ἄφεσις is used on seventeen occasions; once in Matthew (26:28), twice in Mark (1:4; 3:29), ten times in Luke-Acts (1:77; 3:3; 4:18 [twice]; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18), twice in Paul’s writings (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14)<sup>17</sup> and twice in Hebrews (9:22; 10:18). The related verb ἀφίημι is used far more often (143 occurrences), particularly in the synoptic gospels.<sup>18</sup> As has already been seen, however, the word was never explicitly associated with the Jubilee in the

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<sup>9</sup> R. Bultmann, “ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις, παρήημι, πάρεσις,” *TDNT* (1964–1976), 1:510. It is also used to mean “amnesty” or “exemption from taxation” in Esth 2:18.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps with the connotation of “sending out.” *NIDNTTE* (2014), s.v. “ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις.”

<sup>11</sup> There are also some parallels to years of redemption in 1 Maccabees 13 and 15 when both Demetrius and Antiochus wrote to Simon, however these are not explicit.

<sup>12</sup> Bultmann, 1:510.

<sup>13</sup> Bultmann, 1:510 and *NIDNTTE* (2014), s.v. “ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις.”

<sup>14</sup> Bultmann, 1:509-12 and *NIDNTTE* (2014), s.v. “ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις.”

<sup>15</sup> *NIDNTTE* (2014), s.v. “ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις.”

<sup>16</sup> Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, Translated and edited by James D. Ernest (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:238-44.

<sup>17</sup> Traditional views of authorship will be accepted for the purposes of this study.

<sup>18</sup> The word is used 47 times in Matthew, 34 times in Mark, 31 times in Luke, 15 times in John, 3 times in Acts, twice in Romans, 3 times in 1 Corinthians, twice in Hebrews, once in James, twice in 1 John and 3 times in Revelation.

Septuagint or other literature, so the word holds less importance for the purposes of this study.

### Matthew

The solitary appearance of ἄφεσις in Matthew's gospel is seen in 26:28: τοῦτο γάρ ἐστὶν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins).<sup>19</sup> The object of ἄφεσις is ἁμαρτία, and agent of forgiveness, though implicit, is God himself. As has been pointed out by many commentators, the phrase εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν does not appear in the parallel texts of Jesus taking the cup (particularly Mark 14:24, but also Luke 22:17-18; 1 Cor 11:25), which may reflect Matthew's intention to link Jesus' death with that of the suffering servant (Isa 53:12) and Jeremiah's New Covenant prophecy (Jer 31:31-34).<sup>20</sup> In any case, there is little reason to see any reference to the Jubilee in this text.

### Mark

The two occurrences of ἄφεσις in Mark's gospel are seen in 1:4 and 3:29. In 1:4, the focus is John's ministry, who is presented as κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετάνοιας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins). The phrase is identical to that in Matthew 26:28; the object of ἄφεσις is again ἁμαρτία, and agent of forgiveness is God himself.<sup>21</sup> The relationship of ἄφεσις to the baptism of repentance is difficult to gauge. Indeed, as France has noted, "the syntax does not allow any definite conclusion as to precisely how βάπτισμα, μετάνοια and ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν relate to one another."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Byzantine reading of τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης (the new covenant), which may reflect an interpolation from Luke 22:20 or 1 Cor 11:25, makes no difference to the findings of this study.

<sup>20</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33b, edited by Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 773.

For a brief survey of some of other theories regarding the inclusion of this phrase, see Donald A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Expositor's Bible Commentary 8, edited by F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 537. An examination of these theories is superfluous to the purposes of this study.

<sup>21</sup> As one might expect, the identical phrase has led to various redaction criticism theories regarding how Matthew may have used Mark's text.

<sup>22</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, edited by I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Paternoster, 2002), 67.

In 3:29, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is cited as the reason why a person οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἀλλὰ ἔνοχος ἐστὶν αἰωνίου ἁμαρτήματος (never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin). The object of ἄφεσις in this text is ἁμαρτήματα, a relatively infrequent word (used only in 3:28-29 in Mark's gospel) which may be employed to denote sins committed against other people.<sup>23</sup> Even if the word is understood this way, however, it nevertheless remains clear that it is God who forgives.

Thus, Mark uses ἄφεσις in the same way as Matthew; to denote forgiveness. The forgiveness occurs because of sin (ἁμαρτία and ἁμαρτήματα) and is achieved by God himself.

#### *Luke-Acts*

The use of ἄφεσις in Mark and Matthew is consistent with Luke's use of the word. Luke employs ἄφεσις ten times throughout the course of Luke-Acts.<sup>24</sup> Apart from the Isaianic quotation in Luke 4:18-19 (which will be addressed below), ἄφεσις is always used directly in relation to ἁμαρτία ("forgiveness of sins"). In Luke 1:77 and 3:3, the word is used in relation to John's ministry (1:77 is part of Zechariah's prophesy, and 3:3 contains identical phrasing to Mark 1:4). In Luke 24:47, ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν is part of the subject of the preaching to all nations that is to occur, while in Acts this proclamation of ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν is seen on five occasions; three times in Peter's preaching (2:38, 5:31 and 10:43)<sup>25</sup> and twice in Paul's preaching (13:38 and 26:18).

That is not to say ἄφεσις does not have a multi-layered meaning. Luke himself conflated physical deliverance from one's enemies and deliverance from Satan with the forgiveness (ἄφεσις) of sins.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, given the association Luke makes between Isa 61 (where ἄφεσις appears) and the exorcism of demons (Luke 4:16-37; 7:21-22; Acts 10:38), it seems that the redemption (ἄφεσις) which the Isaianic text refers to was also viewed in relation to freedom from the bondage of evil spirits. Ἄφεσις is also frequently tied to the concept of μετάνοια/μετανοέω (see Luke 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31), such that "when Luke speaks of forgiveness he presumes repentance, and vice-

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<sup>23</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, edited by Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 185-86.

<sup>24</sup> See Luke 1:77; 3:3; 4:18 (twice); 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38 and 26:18.

<sup>25</sup> In 5:31 the other apostles are also preaching, though the primacy of Peter is seen in 5:29.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 1:77; Acts 26:18.

versa.”<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the fundamental and foremost meaning of ἄφεσις throughout Luke's two-part corpus is centred on the forgiveness of sins.<sup>28</sup>

Since eight of the ten occurrences of ἄφεσις are understood this way, it stands to reason that the two references to ἄφεσις in the Isaianic quotation (Luke 4:18) should also be read in this light. That is, the “proclamation of liberty for the captives” (κηρύξαι αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεσιν) and letting “the oppressed go free” (τεθραυσμένους ἐν ἀφέσει) should be primarily understood as a proclamation of forgiveness from sin.

In relation to the first reference (κηρύξαι αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεσιν), there are a number of reasons why the freeing of captives (αἰχμαλώτοις) should be primarily viewed in terms of spiritual freedom:

- 1) The use of ἄφεσις, which Luke always used in contexts of spiritual release/forgiveness.
- 2) The freeing of captives (αἰχμαλώτοις) is only mentioned in the Nazareth pericope, which is immediately followed by the driving out of an evil spirit in Capernaum (Luke 4:31-37) thus illustrating (in part) Jesus' fulfilment of the Isaianic text.
- 3) Given that Luke's solitary use of αἰχμάλωτος is in a passage which is programmatic for Luke-Acts, one would expect to see Jesus' fulfilment of

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<sup>27</sup> Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary 21 (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 14.

<sup>28</sup> As Wright has noted, however, this forgiveness of sins announced by Jesus should not be primarily viewed in individual terms. Rather, “... the most natural meaning of the phrase ‘the forgiveness of sins’ to a first-century Jew is not in the first instance the remission of *individual* sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins.” This is particularly relevant given the exilic nature of the Isaianic text (the nation was in an enduring theological exile due to her ongoing sins). Liberation from this exile was signified by the forgiveness of the nation's sins. Thus, the ἄφεσις which Jesus proclaimed was directed at the entire nation, which was captive and oppressed because of her sin. Consequently, it seems that the eschatological use of Isa 61 in Luke-Acts is not so far from the ‘literal sense’ of the Isaianic passage as was once thought. Luke may have included the text (at least in part) to present Jesus as the one who would bring an end to the exile, caused by the sins of the nation. He presented Jesus as a proclaimer of spiritual release, centred on the forgiveness of sins. Where Jesus' original listeners may have heard Isa 61 in terms of release from Roman domination, Luke may have intended it in terms of release from theological exile. While this is in no way certain (particularly given the varying views on the exile), it does seem plausible given this quotation's focus on “release” and Luke's general approach to and use of the Old Testament. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 273 and Bradley C. Gregory, “The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: Isaiah 61:1-3 in Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 no. 3 (September 2007): 496.

this text throughout the course of Luke's Gospel. If the text is taken as a reference to the freeing of spiritual captives, this is clearly fulfilled.<sup>29</sup>

4) Luke never presented Jesus as freeing people in actual physical captivity. In Luke 3, John the Baptist is left imprisoned where he remained until his death (Luke 3:20). In fact, in Luke's Gospel, it is only Barabbas's actual release from captivity. Moreover, in Acts 16 and 27, prisoners are miraculously given the opportunity to escape, though they choose to remain incarcerated.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, as Dowling has noted, Luke was seemingly disinterested in addressing actual physical captivity.<sup>31</sup> His focus was instead on those in spiritual bondage.

Sloan has argued that Luke considered the word *αιχμάλωτος* as having Jubilarly import.<sup>32</sup> He believes that the word probably refers to those who have debilitating debts due to social and/or economic conditions.<sup>33</sup> He also argues that even if the *αιχμάλωτοι* are understood to be prisoners of war (which is the literal meaning of the word), it still has relevance to the Jubilee since it evokes imagery of a nation of exiles (prisoners of war) returning to their homeland, paralleling Jubilee land restoration.<sup>34</sup> Both of these positions seem somewhat inconsistent with what one finds in Luke's work. Indeed, Luke never presents Jesus as someone who frees people from social or economic debts, nor does he ever encourage or even mention land reclamation. When one considers the word's solitary appearance in the programmatic text in Luke 4, Sloan's argument seems even more untenable.

In relation to the second occurrence of *ἄφεσις* in the Isaianic quotation (to let the oppressed go free/ἀποστεῖλαι τεθραυσμένους ἐν ἀφέσει), it again makes sense to read this text in relation to spiritual

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<sup>29</sup> Regarding Jesus' exorcism ministry, aside from the account of the man with the demon in Capernaum mentioned above, Luke also includes four other examples of Jesus exercising a demon/demons out of people (Luke 8:26-39; 9:37-43; 11:14-16; 13:10-17). Four of Luke's statements summarising Jesus' ministry also refer to his exorcism ministry (Luke 4:41; 6:18; 8:1-2, 13:32). For Luke, Jesus' ministry to those possessed by evil spirits was clearly of great significance. Similarly, Jesus' ministry of forgiveness was of central concern. See, for example, Luke 1:77; 5:17-24; 7:48-49; 23:34 and 24:47.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Tuckett. "Luke 4,16-30, Isaiah and Q," in *Logia: Les Paroles de Jésus – The Sayings of Jesus*, ed. J. Delobel, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 59 (Leuven: University Press, 1982), 348.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth V. Dowling, "Luke-Acts: Good News for Slaves?" *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 24 no. 2 (June 2011): 140.

<sup>32</sup> Sloan, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Sloan, 38.

<sup>34</sup> Sloan, 38-39.



freedom.<sup>35</sup> That is, Jesus' ministry liberates people from the power of Satan (see the following account in 4:31-37) and provides forgiveness (ἄφεσις) for those who recognise the oppressive and devastating nature of their sins. It seems unlikely that Luke viewed the oppression as primarily political (that is, as a promise that the Jewish people would be freed from Roman domination), since his work largely avoids passages that could be interpreted as being directly politically subversive.<sup>36</sup>

There are some scholars who argue that "the oppressed" in Isa 58:6 are those who have economic difficulties, and they should therefore be identified this way in Luke 4:18.<sup>37</sup> Even if one emphasises the context of Isa 58, however, it is clear that the central issue in the Isaianic passage was that the people had forsaken "... the judgments of their God" (Isa 58:2). That is, the poor socio-economic and political conditions described in Isa 58 were the result of the peoples' religious sins. Thus, both Isa 58 and Luke 4 emphasise that people are spiritually needy, which Luke addresses by explicating Jesus' ministry as one of forgiveness and spiritual redemption.

The understanding of ἄφεσις as referring primarily to the forgiveness of sins in Luke 4:18-19 has been rejected by some scholars. Turner, for example, has presented several reasons as to why he believes forgiveness is not in view in the Isaianic quotation. He argues:

- 1) The normal meaning of ἄφεσις in Greek (including the Septuagint) was "release," usually in relation to a debt or oppressive conditions.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Luke's audience would not have read it in connection with the forgiveness of sins.
- 2) If Luke had wanted to present ἄφεσις as meaning the forgiveness of sins in Luke 4:18-19, he would have presented it alongside ἁμαρτία (sin) as he did in every other instance in Luke-Acts.<sup>39</sup>
- 3) Since the Isaianic quotation connects ἄφεσις with αἰχμαλώτοι (captives) and τεθραυσμένοι (the oppressed), the word should be interpreted as "liberation" or "freedom."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The question of why this line from Isaiah 58 was inserted is intriguing, however it lies beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>36</sup> Tuckett, 348. This, of course, is a complicated subject. There are, for example, accounts such as the Gerasene demoniac (Luke 8:26-39) which could be read politically.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Sloan, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Turner, 222-23.

<sup>39</sup> Turner, 223. See also Ulrich Busse, *Die Wunder des Propheten Jesus: Die Rezeption, Komposition und Interpretation der Wundertradition im Evangelium des Lukas*, Forschung zur Bibel 24 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), 60.

<sup>40</sup> Turner, 223.

4) If Luke had wanted to communicate the forgiveness of sins, he could have done so "... by turning to more suitable verses of Isaiah".<sup>41</sup>

Each of these arguments has serious flaws:

1) While it is true that the normal meaning of ἄφεσις in the Septuagint centred on "release", the consistent use of the word throughout the New Testament and the early Christian literature clearly demonstrates that it underwent definite semantic development. Moreover, even in non-Christian literature such as the works of Philo and Josephus, it is clear that the meaning of ἄφεσις had developed such that by the time of Luke's two-part composition, it was frequently associated with the remission of sins.<sup>42</sup>

2) Turner's second argument presupposes that Luke felt literary liberty to freely add or subtract words like ἁμαρτιῶν to quotations from the Septuagint. On the contrary, Luke usually treated Old Testament texts carefully.<sup>43</sup> More importantly, however it seems Turner has failed to realise that it is precisely because ἄφεσις is linked to ἁμαρτία in every other instance in Luke-Acts that it should be read in relation to the forgiveness of sins in Luke 4:18-19. That is, the uniform use of ἄφεσις in all other Lucan passages serves to clarify how it should be read in Luke 4.

3) It is extremely unlikely that Luke equated ἄφεσις with a literal "freedom" or "liberation", since nowhere in Luke-Acts is Jesus presented as literally freeing prisoners or the oppressed. Instead, Luke used both αἰχμαλῶται and τεθραυσμένοι symbolically to represent those who are spiritually captive or oppressed.

4) Turner's final argument presupposes that Luke's sole purpose in including the Isaianic quotation was to present Jesus' ministry of forgiveness. This, of course, is unsustainable. There are many reasons why the Isaianic quotation was included, not least of which was to present Jesus as the agent of the text's fulfilment.

Bart Koet has presented a different perspective.<sup>44</sup> He agrees that ἄφεσις must be viewed in relation to the remission of sins, however he also maintains that the word is inextricably linked to Jubilee/Sabbath year traditions.<sup>45</sup> He therefore seeks to connect forgiveness and the Jubilee by arguing that the presence of ἄφεσις in Luke 4:18 denotes a call to repentance for those who have ill-gotten wealth so that they might

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<sup>41</sup> Turner, 224.

<sup>42</sup> Spicq, I:238-44.

<sup>43</sup> Darrell Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 12 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 106.

<sup>44</sup> Koet, 33-35.

<sup>45</sup> Koet, 33-34.

experience forgiveness.<sup>46</sup> This interpretation, however, largely misses the point of ἄφεσις in the passage. The double use of ἄφεσις is designed to emphasise Jesus' ministry of spiritual release, demonstrated throughout the remainder of Luke's Gospel.<sup>47</sup> That is, the point of the text is to denote Jesus' identity and his ministry, not to call Luke's audience to respond in some particular way. While it is possible that Luke's audience may have understood the double use of ἄφεσις as an implicit call to forgiveness ("come and be beneficiaries of Jesus' ministry of forgiveness"), it seems highly unlikely that the word would have necessarily been understood to be a call only for the wealthy to repent of their riches. That is not to say that Luke was unconcerned with calling the rich to repent of the love of wealth; there are many occasions in Luke's Gospel where this is clearly the case (see, for example, 12:13-21; 16:19-31 and 18:18-25). The use of ἄφεσις in Luke 4:18, however, seems to be a more general call for transformation.

### *Paul's Writings*

There are two references to ἄφεσις in Paul's letters. In Ephesians 1:7, Paul writes that Ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων (In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses).<sup>48</sup> Similarly in Colossians 1:13-14, he writes ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ, ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν (he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins).

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<sup>46</sup> Koet, 34-35.

<sup>47</sup> After the Nazareth episode, there are numerous references to Jesus' ministry of forgiveness. In Luke 5:17-26, Jesus' ministry focused on the forgiveness of the paralytic's sins. Indeed, the healing of the paralytic served to prove Jesus' authority to be able to forgive sins. Luke 5:27-32 emphasises Jesus' focus on spiritual liberation; he did not come to "...call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32). A main focus of Luke 7:36-50 is the forgiveness of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet. Similarly, in Luke 15 the three "lost" parables are all concerned with how there is rejoicing in heaven over sinners who repent. After the passion narrative (Luke 22-24), Luke emphasised that Jesus' death and resurrection occurred so that "...repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations" (24:47). While there are many more references to Jesus' ministry of forgiveness (see, for example, Luke 5:8; 11:4; 12:10; 18:13-14), it is clear that the Isaianic quotation's focus on spiritual liberation was played out in the rest of Luke's gospel.

<sup>48</sup> There is not yet any scholarly consensus regarding why terms such as ἄφεσις appear so rarely in Paul's work. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 327-328.

Both texts employ ἄφεσις in much the same way. The differences in the object of ἄφεσις (παράπτωμα in Ephesians and ἁμαρτία in Colossians) are largely inconsequential for the purposes of this study.<sup>49</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that the two words are presented in the plural (in a similar way to what is seen in the synoptic texts), in contrast to the singular παράπτωμα/ἁμαρτία used frequently (and interchangeably) in Romans 5-7. It is again noteworthy that it is God who is the agent of forgiveness, and ἄφεσις is linked to salvation in much the same way as is seen in Luke's writings.

A cursory reading of both texts might suggest that since ἄφεσις is linked with redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις), a superficial connection to the Jubilee might exist. The main problem with such a suggestion, however, is that the word ἀπολύτρωσις never once appears in any of the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25, nor indeed any texts associated with the Jubilee. The term λύτρον (and the related verb λυτρῶ) is instead employed, a word never used in any of Paul's writings. Moreover, if one is to postulate a literary link between this word and another occasions of redemption, more likely candidates would include the Exodus, the exile or even political redemption from Roman rule. Indeed, as O'Brien has noted, all one can safely conclude is that the meaning of the redemption here should be thought of as "... liberation from imprisonment and bondage ... not simply the object of hope ... It is here an existing reality, a present possession."<sup>50</sup> That is, there is no need to have recourse to the Jubilee legislation to explain the term.<sup>51</sup>

### Hebrews

The final two occurrences of ἄφεσις are in Hebrews: 9:22 – χωρὶς αἱματεκχυσίας οὐ γίνεται ἄφεσις (without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness), and 10:17-18 – καὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν καὶ τῶν ἀνομιῶν αὐτῶν οὐ μὴ μνησθήσομαι ἔτι. ὅπου δὲ ἄφεσις τούτων, οὐκέτι προσφορὰ περὶ ἁμαρτίας (then he adds: "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any offering for sin). The object of ἄφεσις is once again ἁμαρτία. This is explicitly clear in 10:17-18, though is also

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<sup>49</sup> Particularly given that the two words are seemingly used as synonyms in Ephesians 2:1.

<sup>50</sup> Peter T O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44, edited by Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 28.

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion about the term ἀπολύτρωσις and possible Old Testament allusions, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42, edited by Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 27-28.

evident in 9:22, where 9:28 details the issue at stake (ἁμαρτίας/sins). Moreover, it is once again God who forgives. Thus, in Hebrews, ἄφεσις is again employed with a singular purpose; to denote God's forgiving of sins. There is no reason to see any reference to the Jubilee in either of these texts.

## Findings

The New Testament authors all employed ἄφεσις to denote, at least in part, the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, the word has a clear and consistent meaning throughout the New Testament, and is later strongly connected with Jesus' death on the cross which is the basis for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>52</sup> The word is never given a secular meaning; it is always used in the religious context of humans needing forgiveness from God).<sup>53</sup> Moreover, there is no need to read ἄφεσις as carrying any Jubiliary undertones of release from slavery, financial debts or marginalisation.

Since the New Testament authors consistently use ἄφεσις with this distinct focus, Spicq has suggested that, "all these NT usages, which are so perfectly homogeneous, presuppose a catechesis – whose scope and evolution are unknown to us – that added the term *aphesis* to the Christian vocabulary with a precise and exclusive theological meaning."<sup>54</sup> If this is true, than one would expect that other early Christian writers aside from the New Testament authors would also use ἄφεσις in association with the forgiveness of sins, without importing Jubilee ideology. O'Brien's survey of the early Christian material confirms that this is the case – every early church writer employed ἄφεσις exclusively in connection with the forgiveness of sins.<sup>55</sup> There are no early Christian authors who associated ἄφεσις with the Jubilee. In the citation of Isa 61 in the epistle of Barnabas, for example, the proclamation of ἄφεσις is understood in terms of the forgiveness of sins for those who are in darkness.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in Irenaeus' multiple citations of Isa 61, there are no references to the Jubilee at all, nor is there a reference to the

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<sup>52</sup> Bultmann, 1:511 and Spicq, 1:243-244.

<sup>53</sup> Spicq, 1:242. See also Tuckett, 348 and Martin Rese, *Alltestamentliche Motive in der Christologie des Lukas* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1969), 145-146.

<sup>54</sup> Spicq, 1:244.

<sup>55</sup> D. P. O'Brien, "A Comparison between Early Jewish and Early Christian Interpretations of the Jubilee Year," *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001): 440-441.

<sup>56</sup> O'Brien, 440.

Jubilee in any of his extant writings.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, as O'Brien has noted, it is not until Origen in the third century that ἄφεσις is associated with the Jubilee.<sup>58</sup> Even here, however, the word is used in relation to the forgiveness of sins.<sup>59</sup> Origen argued that the reason why the crowds sat in groups of fifty at the feeding of the five thousand was because the number fifty "... embraces the remission of sins, in accordance with the mystery of the Jubilee, and of the feast at Pentecost."<sup>60</sup>

Despite this weight of evidence, there are some scholars who still believe that ἄφεσις should be read in relation to the biblical Jubilee. Ringe has presented perhaps the most systematic case as to why "... one should not lose sight of OT Jubilee traditions in attempting to understand the meaning of forgiveness in the Synoptic Gospels' interpretation of Jesus and his message."<sup>61</sup> Her four arguments for this position are summarised below:

- 1) The word ἄφεσις occurs in "Jubilee texts" such as Luke 4:18 and Luke 7:18-23.
- 2) The Greek meaning of ἄφεσις (as a release from legal obligations) influenced the Hebrew notion of forgiveness, which gave it a more ethical or covenantal thrust, in a way reminiscent of the Jubilee traditions.
- 3) The Synoptic accounts use ἄφεσις and ἀφίημι to refer to the release of debts as well as forgiveness.
- 4) The Jubilee traditions in Second and Third Isaiah point to release from the old order into God's eschatological reign, which parallels the Synoptic Gospels' understanding of forgiveness being an eschatological event which inaugurates God's reign.<sup>62</sup>

Her arguments can be addressed as follows:

- 1) Ringe's first argument is clearly circular. It relies on the presumption that Luke 4:18 and 7:18-23 are, in fact, 'Jubilee texts.' Neither passage, however, has any reference to the Jubilee. There is no mention of the word 'Jubilee', no mention of ancestral land, no mention of the number fifty (which was strongly associated with the Jubilee in Second Temple literature), no blowing of the trumpet and no redemption of houses. Moreover, as has been argued elsewhere, it is very unlikely that Luke or his audience would have associated Isaiah 61 with the Jubilee.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Irenaeus refers to Isa 61 in *Against Heresies* 2.22; 3.9.3; 3.17.1 and 4.23.1. O'Brien, 440.

<sup>58</sup> O'Brien, 441.

<sup>59</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 11.3 (ANF, 9:432-433).

<sup>60</sup> Origen, 11.3.

<sup>61</sup> Ringe, 219.

<sup>62</sup> Ringe, 219-220.

<sup>63</sup> See Luthy, 142-174.

2) As has been stated above, the New Testament authors' use of ἄφεσις is manifestly different from its use in the Septuagint and classical Greek literature. While the semantic development of ἄφεσις is not clear, its use in the New Testament and in early church documents is clearly distinct from its use in the Septuagint in relation to the Jubilee. Even in non-Christian literature such as the works of Philo and Josephus, it is clear that the meaning of ἄφεσις had developed such that it was frequently associated with the remission of sins.<sup>64</sup>

3) The argument that the Synoptic accounts use ἄφεσις and ἀφήμι to refer to the release of debts as well as forgiveness misrepresents the distinct use of each word. Ἄφεσις is *not* used to refer to the release of debts by the Synoptic authors – it is only used in reference to the forgiveness of sins (if one includes Luke 4:18).<sup>65</sup> While ἀφήμι is used to refer to the release of debts, it has a broad semantic range (it is also used to mean “to let go,” “to leave in peace” and “to permit”). Moreover, ἀφήμι does not carry the same Jubilee connotations as ἄφεσις – there is no discernible link between ἀφήμι and the Jubilee anywhere in the Septuagint, or indeed in any Greek literature (including the New Testament).

4) While Ringe's fourth argument has some merit, it nevertheless does not stand to reason that possible Old Testament parallels would necessarily have been in the mind of the New Testament authors or their readers, particularly given that there are no explicit references to the Jubilee in any New Testament text.

Sloan takes a different approach. He concedes that ἄφεσις should be primarily understood in terms of the forgiveness of sin, however he links this forgiveness with the Day of Atonement which marked the start of Jubilee years.<sup>66</sup> Thus, he argues that notions of forgiveness are “culturally bound up ... with the day of Jubilee.”<sup>67</sup> It seems highly unlikely, however, that New Testament authors would have employed ἄφεσις to signal continuity between the Day of Atonement and Jesus' ministry, given that the word ἄφεσις is largely absent from Pentateuchal accounts of the Day of Atonement.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, even if a New Testament author did see continuity between the Day of Atonement and the word ἄφεσις, there is again no need to seek recourse to the Jubilee legislation.

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<sup>64</sup> Spicq, I:238-44.

<sup>65</sup> Matt 26:28; Mark 1:4; 3:29; Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47. Indeed, there is a “striking contrast” between the exclusivity of ἄφεσις and the wider semantic range of ἀφήμι. NIDNTE (2014), s.v. “ἀφήμι, ἄφεσις.”

<sup>66</sup> Sloan, 160.

<sup>67</sup> Sloan, 160.

<sup>68</sup> Its one occurrence in the Day of Atonement legislation is in Lev 16:26.

The Day of Atonement was a Jewish institution in its own right, celebrated every year (Lev 16:34). Its association with the Jubilee only occurred once every fifty years.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that ἄφεσις was strongly associated with the Jubilee in the Septuagint. The related verb ἀφίημι, however, was unconnected with the Jubilee, both in the Old Testament texts and in later documents (including the New Testament). The semantic meaning of both words developed, as seen in many classical works, such that by the time of Philo and Josephus, ἄφεσις in particular was commonly used in relation to the remission of sins. Within the New Testament, ἄφεσις has a uniform and exclusive meaning, centred on the forgiveness of sins. This is echoed clearly in other early church literature. Unlike the Septuagint, ἄφεσις is not associated with the Jubilee. There is therefore no need to resort to the Old Testament texts to identify or elucidate the word's meaning, and to do so would result in skewing one's understanding of the word's distinct meaning for the New Testament authors and their audience/s.

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