

The idea that the sins of one person can be forgiven because of another person's sacrifice – is a fundamental part of the Christian understanding of substitutionary atonement. We take it for granted that mercy is shown to the guilty for the sake of an innocent person. However, if you think about it, this is quite illogical. But somehow we have gotten used to the idea that God will forgive many sinners because of the righteousness of just one person.

Does the idea of granting mercy for the sake of another have precedent in the Hebrew Scriptures? One might think it was invented in the New Testament. But interestingly, according to Jewish scholars, the answer is yes. Many have found this merciful “divine illogic” throughout the Old Testament and consider it an important principle of Judaism! Jewish scholars explore the minutest details of the Torah and Hebrew scriptures, often picking up subtle themes that Christians might miss. So it is fascinating to see all the motifs that they find even though they may not be looking for Jesus.

The Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna sees this pattern as early as Genesis 19, when Lot was saved from the destruction of Sodom. Lot had chosen to move to Sodom knowing that it was sinful. He became active in city leadership and even allowed his daughters to intermarry with the population. Even though Lot wasn't as corrupt as the Sodomites, God did not save him because of his own righteousness. Rather, the Bible says that “God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot from the midst of the upheaval” (Gen 19:29). God delivered Lot from the catastrophe for the sake of Abraham – as a response to Abraham's faithfulness, not Lot's.

“This ‘doctrine of merit’ is a not an infrequent theme in the Bible and constitutes many such incidents in which the righteousness of chosen individuals may sustain other individuals or even an entire group through its protective power.”

For some strange reason, God often made his forgiveness contingent on an intercessor's prayer. For instance, when King Abimelech took Abraham's wife Sarah captive, God told him that he was under judgment, but if Abraham prayed for him, he would live. (Gen 20:7)

At one point, God even lamented that no one can be found to “stand in the gap” for his people, as if he will not act without an intercessor (Ezekiel 22:30).

Similarly, at the end of the story of Job, God was furious with Job's counselors and said to them, *“I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has....My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.”* (Job 42:7-8) His forgiveness seems to await the request from Job, the innocent victim of their sin. Was God saying that in accepting his prayer, he will pardon them for Job's sake, rather than their own?

A related idea in Judaism is that God will show special mercy toward the people of Israel because of the merits of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They see this as coming from God's promises of blessing to the patriarchs, and because he told Moses that he would pardon to the thousandth generation those who love him (Ex 34:6-7). So, when Moses appealed to God to forgive Israel in the wilderness, he reminded him of his promise to his ancestors. (Ex. 32:13, Deut. 9:27) God's mercy is often linked to his pledge to the patriarchs.

*Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.* Micah 7:18-20

John the Baptist, however, told his audience to repent and to not assume that the merit of their ancestors would be sufficient to pay for their sin: *“Do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”* (Matt 3:9)

While these practices are not explicitly pointing toward Christ, they do show that the Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible supports the idea that a sinner can seek forgiveness from God because of the righteous merits of another person.

Remarkably, in the subtle logic of Torah regulations that Christians tend not to read, we see a picture of Christ as our great High Priest who obtained forgiveness for our sins through his own death.