

# Amnesty or Amnesia? A Christian Dilemma in the United States of America

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*It is I. I am he who wipes out your transgressions,  
and your sins I will not remember. (Isa. 43:25)*

It was the custom in the Ancient Near East for kings to proclaim releases from debts, exemptions from taxes, and pardons for law-breakers when they ascended to the throne.<sup>[1]</sup> By making these declarations of clemency, newly crowned kings attempted to curry the favor of their subjects and to earn their loyalty. According to the royal propaganda these concessions demonstrated the new king's justice and righteousness in contrast to the corruption and abuses of power that had been allowed to fester during the reign of his predecessor, and which had landed so many subjects in debt or in bondage or placed them on the wrong side of the law. Cancelling debts, releasing bondsmen and bondswomen, and suspending certain taxes or abolishing them altogether was a way for the king to rebalance the skewed social order that had concentrated wealth and power into the hands of the privileged few. The Bible refers to such enactments as proclamations of liberty, דְּרֹר (*d<sup>e</sup>rōr*). A synonym in English for this type of forbearance is “amnesty.”



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The Ancient Near Eastern declarations of amnesty influenced ancient Israel's legislation, its theology, and also the course of its history. On the historical level, the disintegration of the kingdom of David and Solomon into the kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south appears to have been precipitated by Rehoboam's refusal to follow the Ancient Near Eastern custom by granting a general amnesty to his subjects after the death of King Solomon (1 Kgs. 12:1-17). As for biblical legislation, the institution of the Jubilee, in which slaves were set free and debts were cancelled and land reverted to its ancestral allotment (Lev. 25), mirrors the amnesties proclaimed at the ascension of Ancient Near Eastern Kings. Since, in theory, God was Israel's king, there were no periodic changes of monarch when the social order would be rebalanced, therefore the Torah instituted a regular

cycle of amnesty at fifty-year intervals. But perhaps it was Israel's prophetic tradition that was most deeply influenced by the Ancient Near Eastern custom of amnesty, for the biblical prophets began to describe the coming redemption from Israel's subjection to the world empires in terms of God's ascending the throne and proclaiming amnesty to all his subjects.

The prophetic appropriation of amnesty, in turn, profoundly influenced the beginnings of Christianity. When Jesus came proclaiming the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven—God's direct reign over the earth, which was sweeping aside the old order of oppressive human empires—he quoted Isaiah 61, which describes the redemption in terms of a royal proclamation of amnesty:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, he sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to send out the oppressed in freedom, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. (Luke 4:18-19; Isa. 61:1-2)

In other words, according to Jesus a general amnesty was to mark the beginning of God's better reign. Amnesty was simultaneously the sign and the result of God's redeeming power. Amnesty is at the very core of the Gospel: it is the means by which God accomplishes redemption, and it is the means by which we, the beneficiaries of his abundant goodness, participate in his better rule.

Our English word “amnesty” derives from the Greek term ἀμνηστία (*amnēstia*), which at its most basic level means “forgetfulness.” The noun ἀμνηστία does not occur in the Greek New Testament, nor does it occur in the Greek translation of any of the books of the Hebrew Bible, but the basic concept of forgetfulness as a metaphor for forgiveness is well attested.

The biblical authors used various metaphors for forgiveness in their writings.

One such metaphor is the lifting up and carrying away of an impossibly heavy burden from the shoulders of someone being crushed under a heavy load. God forgives by picking up our burden of sin and carrying it away. Another biblical metaphor for forgiveness is the cancellation of an enormous debt that a person will never be able to repay. God forgives by destroying the promissory note of indebtedness, thereby freeing the debtor from the obligation of repayment for his sins.<sup>[2]</sup> A third metaphor is forgetfulness.

We encountered one example of the biblical usage of the forgetfulness metaphor in the quotation at the opening of this essay, where God declares to Israel that he will erase transgression (using the metaphor of destroying a promissory note) and stop remembering sin (Isa. 43:25). Another such example is found in the book of Jeremiah:

I will forgive your iniquities, and your sins I will not remember again. (Jer. 31:34)

The Greek translation of this verse rendered *ζᾱchar* (*zāchar*), the Hebrew verb for “remember,” with the verb *μimnēskesthai* (*mimnēskesthai*, “to remember”), which is built from the same *μνη-* root from which the noun *ἀμνηστία* (*amnēstia*, “amnesty”) is formed.<sup>[3]</sup> So, although the precise word “amnesty” does not occur in the Bible, the concept is definitely there.

Not only does God describe himself as one who is willing to forget sins, but repentant sinners in the Bible plead with God to forget the error of their ways. “Remember not the sins of my youth,” begs the Psalmist (Ps. 25:7). “Do not remember our former iniquities” (Ps. 79:8).

As followers of Jesus, then, we are all the beneficiaries of God’s amnesty, and Jesus was quite clear that his followers are under an obligation to extend amnesty to others. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:21-35) illustrates in the plainest of terms the dire consequences of refusing to forgive



as we have been forgiven. But more than that, amnesty is a celebration and a demonstration of God's better reign. Impersonal institutions may be cold and callous toward the suffering of human beings who are trapped by injustice, swamped by debt, crushed by sin, but God is responsive to the plight of human beings. He knows that the concentration of power and wealth into the hands of a few inevitably leads to the corruption of those few and to the suffering of the many. Therefore he establishes justice and righteousness by wiping the slate clean, lifting the burden from our shoulders, and granting a general amnesty to all humankind.



*Graffiti on the wall separating Bethlehem from Israel.*

*Photographed by the author.*

Given that we are all recipients of God's amnesty, it chills me to the bone to witness how Christians in the United States, my home country, have allowed the term "amnesty" to become a dirtier word in the political discourse on immigration than the foul language that so constantly spews from the mouth of the president.<sup>[4]</sup> It seems to me that that segment of Christianity in the United States which has aligned itself so closely to the promoters of anti-immigrant policy has suffered from a deadly form of amnesia.<sup>[5]</sup> We seem to have forgotten that before God we are all immigrants and we are all the recipients of his amnesty.<sup>[6]</sup>

I believe the time has come not only to take back our vocabulary—to redeem, as it were, "amnesty" from political captivity—but, much more importantly, the time has come for Jesus' followers to challenge the political ideologies that oppose extending amnesty to men, women, and children who have entered this country illegally or who have overstayed their visas. They may be in violation of a poorly crafted law passed by temporal human government,

but we have broken the perfect law of liberty that gives life, and yet we have received amnesty. Is it too much, then, for us to insist that our political leaders grant amnesty to unauthorized immigrants? Or will we succumb to our amnesia, demanding that these sons and daughters of the living God be shipped back beyond our borders? Granting amnesty to unauthorized immigrants in our country would, in my opinion, be an excellent first step toward fulfilling the [Other Greatest Commandment](#).



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## Notes

**[1]** See Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995).

**[2]** See Gary A. Anderson, “From Israel’s Burden to Israel’s Debt: Towards A Theology of Sin in Biblical and Early Second Temple Sources,” in *Reworking the Bible: Apocryphal and Related Texts at Qumran* (ed. Esther Chazon, Devorah Dimant, and Ruth Clements; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1-30.

**[3]** The Greek verb *μυμήσκεσθαι* is also used to translate the Hebrew verb *רָכַז* in Isa. 43:25, Ps. 25:7, and Ps. 79:8.

**[4]** Cf., e.g., Kelsey Snell and Brian Naylor, “[Trump Uses Vulgar Language To Refer To African Countries, Sources Say](#).”

**[5]** 81% of the white evangelical vote went to Donald Trump in the 2016 election according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

**[6]** See Joshua N. Tilton, “[Other Greatest Commandment](#).”