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Prophetic Forgiveness in Josephus and Mark

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A seeming instance of remarkably ‘high’ Christology occurs in the Markan episode about the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1–12). Here, as Jesus tells the paralysed man ‘Your sins are forgiven’, some scribes object by accusing Jesus of blasphemy, an accusation backed up by the rhetorical question ‘Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ Jesus, as part of his response, reasserts that ‘the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’, thereby indicating, if not his divinity in the full sense, at least a very high level of identification with God.

Regardless of how they evaluate the historicity of the Markan account, scholars have tended to see in the scribes’ rejoinder a realistic expression of first-century Jewish convictions: that someone else than God would have the prerogative to grant absolution of sins committed was unheard of in early Judaism. For example, Peter Fiedler wrote in 1976: ‘Any expectation of an act of forgiving by anyone else than God himself was missing; not only that: such an activity could only be understood as an attack upon God’s own prerogative – as far as it would be taken seriously at all.’¹ Similar statements are easily found in more recent literature.² I have previously challenged this notion by proposing that in Josephus, *Ant.* 6.92, we have evidence that an ability to forgive could be attributed to a prophet in early Judaism and that the forgiving activity of the historical Jesus should

¹ Peter Fiedler, *Jesus und die Sünder* (BET 3; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), 115 (my translation).

² See, e.g., Hans-Josef Klauck, ‘Die Frage der Sündenvergebung in der Perikope von der Heilung des Gelähmten (Mk 2,1-12 parr)’, *BZ NS* 25 (1981): 223–48 (236–41); Darrell L. Bock, ‘The Son of Man in Luke 5:24’, *BBR* 1 (1991): 109–21 (117–18); Chong-Hyon Sung, *Vergebung der Sünden: Jesu Praxis der Sündenvergebung nach den Synoptikern und ihre Voraussetzungen im Alten Testament und frühen Judentum* (WUNT 2:57; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 143; Otfried Hofius, ‘Jesu Zuspruch der Sündenvergebung: Exegetische Erwägungen zu Mk 2,5b’, in *Sünde und Gericht* (ed. I. Baldemann et al.; JBT 9; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1994), 125–43; Sigurd Grindheim, *God’s Equal: What Can We Know about Jesus’ Self-Understanding in the Synoptic Gospels?* (LNTS 446; London: T&T Clark, 2011), 60–76.

be understood in the light of this.³ This claim in its turn was recently questioned by Daniel Johansson, whose article investigates whether the scribes' claim in Mark 2:7 is representative of early Judaism. In his survey of the purported evidence for notions of forgiveness being bestowed by human and angelic agents, Johansson arrives at a number of conclusions that are in agreement with mine, e.g., that there is no reason to believe that priests announced forgiveness, that an activity of forgiving sins did not belong to standard messianic expectations and that there are a few passages which seem to presuppose that the Angel of the Lord can indeed forgive sins. He rejects my proposal, however, that Jesus' statement 'Your sins are forgiven' would not, in an early Jewish context, be heard as going beyond the mediation of forgiveness expected of Samuel and other prophets.⁴

In the following, I set out to respond to Johansson's critique and to clarify further some of my points. I will begin by drawing attention to the discrepancy that in my view exists between, on the one hand, the dichotomization of human and divine forgiveness implied by Mark 2:7 and adopted by Johansson, and on the other, early Jewish notions of agency. Then, I will develop my interpretation of *Ant.* 6.92 in view of Johansson's criticism, and finally, some conclusions about the passage's import for evaluating the historical credibility of Mark 2:7 will be made.

Human or Divine – A Dubious Dichotomy

A conception that appears to underlie Johansson's treatment is the dichotomy between, on the one hand, God's forgiveness of sins committed against himself, and on the other, human or angelic forgiveness of such sins. The latter phenomenon, the existence of which Johansson questions, is variously referred to by him as 'to forgive sins in the place of God', 'to forgive in God's stead' and to 'personally forgive ... in God's place', and by this he evidently means something different from 'mediating for-

³ Tobias Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission* (SNTSMS 150; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 146–49, 164–66.

⁴ Daniel Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?'" Human and Angelic Agents, and Divine Forgiveness in Early Judaism', *JSNT* 33 (2011): 351–74. See also Daniel Johansson, 'Jesus and God in the Gospel of Mark: Unity and Distinction' (Ph.D. diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2011), 51–52; Benjamin Pascut, review of T. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission*, *RSR* 38 (2012): 237.

giveness from God', 'pronouncing an absolution' or 'announcing God's forgiveness'.⁵ In his search for 'exception[s] to the view that God alone forgives',⁶ Johansson mostly seems to assume that forgiveness is a kind of zero-sum game, where it is *either* God *or* someone else who forgives.⁷ Thus, if it can be demonstrated that a given passage deals with forgiveness granted by God, the function of a human or angelic agent can at most be one of mediating forgiveness, and not one of forgiving; conversely, if someone else would be described as forgiving sins, this would mean that it is no longer God who forgives.

It is doubtful that this dichotomized way of thinking is congenial with early Jewish theology. To be sure, it is present in Mark 2:7, but since we are interested in assessing the historical plausibility of that very statement, we do well not to let our reading of the comparative material be influenced by it. Ultimately, of course, only God can forgive sins committed against him, but this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of human and angelic agents forgiving sins on behalf of God. For an analogy, one may consider how the bestowal of blessing can be ascribed at one and the same time both to God, the source of all blessings, and to human agents who pray for and mediate it. Jacob blessed his sons and grandsons (Gen 48:15; 49:28) by invoking God's blessing (48:16; 49:25). Balaam has to bless those who God blesses (Num 22:6, 12; 23:11–12, 20). Aaron and his sons are instructed to bless Israel with the formula 'May the Lord bless you', at which God himself will bless the people (Num 6:23–27). None of these cases implies that the human capacity to bless would somehow compete with God's prerogative to bless or that human blessing can occur independently of God's blessing – in fact, one of the points made in the Balaam cycle is that the diviner's blessings and curses are entirely dependent on the will of God. Another analogy is the attribution of divine 'signs and wonders' to Moses in Exod 34:11–12, which does not substan-

⁵ Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins'", 351, 356, 358.

⁶ Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins'", 369.

⁷ On finding that Exod 23:21 and Zech 3:4 may reckon with the possibility that the Angel of Lord forgives sins, Johansson abandons the zero-sum game theory by asking 'to what extent these passages constitute factual exceptions to the view that God alone can pardon sins ... there is so much overlap between YHWH and his angel in these passages that it is difficult to see that the attribution of forgiveness to the Angel of YHWH would call into question that forgiveness is a divine prerogative' ("Who Can Forgive Sins", 369). If one substitutes 'prophet' for 'angel' in this statement, it functions excellently as a commentary on my interpretation of *Ant.* 6.92 (and, with due caution, 4Q242).

tially clash with the insistence elsewhere that it was God who wrought such wonders. The phenomenon has been labelled ‘the principle of dual agency’, and its tendency to occur with special frequency in connection with descriptions of prophets has been noted.⁸ For the sake of precision, it may be useful here to adopt, with some slight modification, the classic philosophical distinction between primary and secondary causes: God, as the primary cause of blessing and wonder, ‘blesses’ and ‘performs wondrous deeds’ in the ‘primary sense’ of that word, whereas human beings ‘bless’ and ‘perform wondrous deeds’ in the ‘secondary sense’, that is, as mediators or agents who are fully dependent on God for their performance of this activity. At the same time, it must be noted these two ‘senses’ are not differentiated on the philological level. In other words, while the distinction between the primary and secondary senses of ‘to bless’ is helpful for analytical purposes, it is not normally highlighted in ancient Israelite thought.

Similarly, if in early Judaism there exists the notion that humans or angels can forgive sins, then we must surely not understand this as an alternative to God’s forgiveness or as an infringement on his prerogative, but just as with the idea of human representatives who bless in the ‘secondary’ sense of procuring and mediating God’s blessing, anyone who forgives would so ‘secondarily’, that is, as an emissary of God and on his behalf. Evidence for such a representative activity of forgiving has hitherto been very uncertain and restricted to the incomplete *Prayer of Nabonidus* (4Q242) which, depending on the restoration of the text, may tell the story of how a Jewish diviner ‘forgave’ (שבק) the sin of king Nabonidus.⁹ If this is indeed how the fragment should be read, as I deem plausible,

⁸ Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets* (FAT 27; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 125–27. See further Isac Leo Seeligmann, ‘Menschliches Heldentum und göttliche Hilfe: Die doppelte Kausalität im alttestamentlichen Geschichtsdnken’, *TZ* 19 (1963): 385–411, repr. in *Gesammelte Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel* (FAT 41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Yairah Amit, ‘The Dual Causality Principle and Its Effects on Biblical Literature’, *VT* 37 (1987): 385–400; Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103–104.

⁹ André Dupont-Sommer, *Les écrits esséniens découverts près de la mer Morte* (Paris: Payot, 1959), 340–41; André Dupont-Sommer, ‘Exorcismes et guérisons dans les écrits de Qoumrân’, in *Congress Volume: Oxford 1959* (VTSup 7; Leiden: Brill, 1960), 246–61; Walter Kirchschräger, ‘Exorzismus in Qumran?’, *Kairos* 18 (1976): 135–53; Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (3rd ed.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 274; Florentino García Martínez, *Qumran and Apocalyptic: Studies on the Aramaic Texts from Qumran* (STDJ 9; Leiden: Brill, 1992), 125–26, are among those who support this reading.

then the diviner's forgiveness must be understood in the secondary sense. But the fragmentary state of the text rules out any certainty.¹⁰ A more obvious articulation of the notion of forgiveness in this secondary sense can be found in the New Testament. The risen Jesus' commissioning of his disciples to forgive sins in John 20:21–23 does not set human forgiveness in contrast to divine forgiveness, but, on the contrary, implies that the disciples' forgiveness is concomitant with that of God: 'If you [*sc.* the disciples] forgive (ἄν ... ἀφῆτε) the sins of any, they are forgiven (ἀφεόνται) [*sc.* by God] for them' (20:23). Here, in the protasis, ἀφιέναι takes a grammatical subject other than God and is thus used in the secondary sense, but God is still the ultimate source of forgiveness, as implied by the *passivum divinum* of the same verb – now used in the primary sense – in the apodosis. I have suggested elsewhere that John 20:23 is modelled on Num 22:6 and that it is consonant with an early Jewish understanding of prophecy.¹¹ Yet, this passage occurs in a primitive Christian source that is later than the Gospel of Mark. The two instances that I have mentioned so far where שבק or ἀφιέναι is used in the secondary sense are, therefore, insufficient to establish the point that 'to forgive' was used both in the primary and in the secondary sense in early Judaism,

¹⁰ Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins'", 359 contends that the interpretation of וְהִטָּא שְׁבַק לֵה גֹר in 4Q242 as 'and my sin, he [God] forgave it. A diviner...' is 'least problematic grammatically' on the grounds that לֵה should probably be understood as a pronominal object. The latter point is convincing, but לֵה can be taken as the direct object even if גֹר is the subject of שְׁבַק: 'and my sin, a diviner forgave it'. Moreover, whereas asyndeton is not extremely rare in Aramaic, the strong tendency to avoid it gives weight to the proposal that the sentence is 'defined by the two ו which precede וְהִטָּא and וְהוּא' (García Martínez, *Qumran and Apocalyptic*, 125). Still, Johansson's reading is in agreement with that of many scholars, among whom are Rudolf Meyer, *Das Gebet des Nabonid: Eine in den Qumran-Handschriften wiederentdeckte Weisheits Erzählung* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 23–24; Pierre Grelot, 'La prière de Nabonide (4 Q Or Nab): Nouvel essai de restauration', *RevQ* 9 (1978): 483–95; Bernd Janowski, 'Sündenvergebung „um Hiobs willen“: Fürbitte und Vergebung in 11QtgJob 38 2f. und Hi 42 9f. LXX', *ZNW* 73 (1982): 251–80; Frank Moore Cross, 'Fragments of the Prayer of Nabonidus', *IEJ* 34 (1984): 260–64; Émile Puech, 'La prière de Nabonide (4Q242)', in *Targumic and Cognate Studies: Essays in Honour of Martin McNamara* (ed. K. J. Cathcart and M. Maher; JSOTS 230; Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1996), 208–27; John Collins, '4QPrayer of Nabonidus ar', in *Qumran Cave 4.XVII: Parabiblical Texts, Part 3* (ed. G. Brooke et al.; DJD XXII; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 83–93; Reinhard G. Kratz, 'Nabonid in Qumran', in *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident* (ed. E. Cancik-Kirschbaum, M. Ess and J. Marzahn; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 253–70.

¹¹ Tobias Hägerland, 'The Power of Prophecy: A Septuagintal Echo in John 20:19–23', *CBQ* 71 (2009): 84–103.

although this appears *a priori* likely in view of what was said above about the use of ‘to bless’.

However, it seems to me that Josephus employs the terminology in this secondary sense in *Ant.* 6.92 where, as I read the text, a crowd begs Samuel the prophet to ‘forgive’ (ἀφεῖναι) a sin they committed against God. In the following, I will respond to the objections made by Johansson to my reading of that passage.

A Prophetic Right to Forgive Sin (Josephus, *Ant.* 6.92)

The passage occurs in the context of Samuel’s farewell speech (*Ant.* 6.86–94; cf. 1 Sam 12:16–25), a section in which Josephus highlights the status of Samuel as a prophet.¹² I understand the text as saying that, in response to Samuel’s authentication by the sudden appearance of thunder, lightning and hail, the people ‘confessed that they had sinned and had fallen into this because of ignorance, and they began to implore the prophet as a mild and gentle father, to make God benevolent towards them and to forgive this sin (ταύτην ἀφεῖναι τὴν ἁμαρτίαν)’ (*Ant.* 6.92). As the farewell speech reproaches the people for having sinned against God, and not against Samuel, the prophet seems to be asked to forgive on behalf of God, in the secondary sense of praying for forgiveness and dismissing the punishment for the sin.¹³ Johansson rejects this interpretation for three reasons. First of all, he contests my suggestion about the vocabulary in the passage. Against my proposal that Josephus employs ἀφεῖναι ἁμαρτίαν to denote something slightly different from συγγινώσκειν, Johansson argues that the two expressions are interchangeable. Secondly, he questions my analysis of the passage’s syntax, and defends the translations that identify God as the implied subject of ἀφεῖναι. Thirdly, he claims that there are other passages in the *Antiquities* that militate against a notion of prophetic forgiveness, and that even if the interpretation of 6.92 in these terms were correct, such a commission to pray for and mediate forgiveness would not

¹² Christopher Begg, ‘Samuel’s Farewell Discourse according to Josephus’, *SJOT* 11 (1997): 56–77. On Josephus’ recognition of Samuel as a prophet, see also Louis H. Feldman, ‘Prophets and Prophecy in Josephus’, *JTS* 41 (1990): 386–422; Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 490–91.

¹³ Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness*, 146–49.

amount to the ‘authority to forgive sins’ claimed by Jesus in Mark 2:1–12.¹⁴ I will address, in turn, these matters of vocabulary, syntax and semantics.

Josephus’ Use of ἀφιέναι

Let us begin with the vocabulary of *Ant.* 6.92. The expression used here is ἀφεῖναι τὴν ἁμαρτίαν. It is the only occurrence of this phrase in the writings of Josephus, the more common term for forgiveness being συγγινώσκειν, which always denotes forgiveness in the primary sense. Johansson nonetheless suggests that apart from *Ant.* 6.92, Josephus sometimes employs ἀφιέναι with reference to human forgiveness, and in one case to denote divine forgiveness. In two places, ἀφιέναι occurs with a term for ‘sin’ together with συγγινώσκειν, which indicates that the two verbs are ‘more or less synonymous’, according to Johansson. He claims that these circumstances invalidate my opinion that Josephus may use ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίαν in a sense that is distinct from that of συγγινώσκειν, that is, in the secondary sense of a prophetic mediation of God’s forgiveness.¹⁵ Closer scrutiny of the pertinent passages reveals that Johansson is mistaken here.

In *Ant.* 15.48, we find the phrase παρήκε δὲ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν. The verb is not ἀφιέναι but παριέναι. Josephus employs this verb many times in accordance with normal Greek usage, both in its concrete sense ‘weaken’, ‘slacken’, and with the meaning ‘disregard’, ‘pass over’. Accordingly, in the LCL translation of *Antiquities*, Marcus translates this passage ‘But he overlooked her offence’.¹⁶ Such an understanding is supported by the immediate context of the phrase. Josephus relates how Herod the Great discovered Alexandra’s secret plan of fleeing to Egypt and caught her in the act, but decided not to punish her because ‘it seemed to him that he would be more likely to have his motives escape detection if he did not act at once or immediately after what had happened’ (15.49 [LCL]). It is clear that Herod was not reconciled to Alexandra, but that he chose for

¹⁴ Johansson, “‘Who Can Forgive Sins’”, 360–63.

¹⁵ Johansson, “‘Who Can Forgive Sins’”, 361–62; cf. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness*, 148–49.

¹⁶ LCL = *Josephus* (trans. H. St. J. Thackeray et al.; 10 vols.; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926–1965).

pragmatic reasons not to take any measures against her at the moment, according to Josephus. This passage, therefore, has nothing to do with forgiveness and is irrelevant for the understanding of *Ant.* 6.92.

Three passages use ἀφιέναι with objects related to sin or wrongdoing: ἀφεῖναι τοὺς πλημμλήσαντας (*Ant.* 2.145); τοὺς τοιούτους [*sc.* τοὺς ἡμαρτημένους] ἀφεῖναι (11.144); and ἀμαρτόντας ἀφιέναι (15.356). Translators usually give ‘pardon’ for ἀφιέναι in these three cases, and the passages may at first glance appear to parallel the expression in *Ant.* 6.92. However, it is crucial to note that these are *not* instances of the verb with the dative of person and the accusative of thing, as in *Ant.* 6.92 and in the standard biblical use of ἀφιέναι in the sense ‘to forgive’, but rather examples of the verb with the accusative of person, which normally in Greek means ‘to acquit’, ‘to release’. In *Ant.* 11.144, the verb also takes the genitive of thing, and Marcus’ translation captures the sense well: ‘to exempt even such sinners from punishment’ (καὶ τοὺς τοιούτους ἀφεῖναι τῆς κολάσεως). That this relates to God’s forgiveness is clear from Josephus’ use of συγγνωμονῆσαι shortly before, but the synonymy of the expressions is by no means evident or even likely. Similarly, in 2.145 and 15.356, Josephus employs the verb in legal contexts to denote the acquittal of wrongdoers, and not with reference to an ‘act of reconciliation’.¹⁷ We have in the three mentioned passages a use of ἀφιέναι that cannot tell us how the verb should be understood in 6.92.

Only *J.W.* 2.77 actually employs ἀφιέναι in a construction that parallels that of *Ant.* 6.92, that is, with the dative of person and the accusative of thing: Οὐάρος δὲ τῷ πλήθει μὲν ἠφίει τὰς αἰτίας. But does it really mean that Varus *forgave* the Idumaeen rebels? There is no reason to assume that, since the object of ἀφιέναι here is not a word that denotes ‘sin’. Josephus frequently uses αἰτία in the sense of ‘accusation’ or ‘charge’, and ἀφιέναι αἰτίαν is a standard Greek expression denoting ‘to dismiss an accusation’. Mason translates accordingly: ‘Varus dismissed the charges against the bulk [of them]’.¹⁸ Not even here, then, is there unambiguous evidence for Josephus’ use of the verb in a sense more or less synonymous with συγγινώσκειν.

It goes without saying that the considerations so far do not, by themselves, rule out the possibility that Josephus could have used ἀφιέναι

¹⁷ Cf. Johansson, “‘Who Can Forgive Sins’”, 362.

¹⁸ Mason = *Flavius Josephus Judean War 2* (trans. S. Mason; vol. 1b of *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*; Leiden: Brill, 2008).

ἁμαρτίαν and συγγινώσκειν as synonyms that both denote ‘to forgive’ in an exclusively primary sense. What should be clear by now is simply that there is no support for this in other passages, and that the sense of ἀφείναι ἁμαρτίαν in *Ant.* 6.92 has to be decided from that passage itself and its context. The question to which we must now turn, then, is this: Does the syntax of the passage support the interpretation commonly adopted by translators, that is, that τούτην ἀφείναι τὴν ἁμαρτίαν takes God as its subject and should thus be understood as ‘to forgive this sin’ in the primary sense?

Who Is Expected to Forgive?

My argument that Samuel, and not God, must be the subject of ἀφείναι in *Ant.* 6.92 builds on the observation that καταστῆσαι and ἀφείναι are parallel in this passage, with Samuel clearly being the subject of the former infinitive. Johansson challenges this by suggesting that καί here is consecutive, which would warrant the translation ‘they begged the prophet... to make God benevolent towards them *so that* he would forgive this sin’. On this reading, there is no reason to suppose the subject to be anyone else than God, and this is also how translators have commonly understood the sentence.¹⁹ Despite the fact that many expert scholars indeed seem to have taken καί as consecutive here, I do not think that the grammar allows for this interpretation.

The well-known καί *consecutivum* occurs in various constructions, but it always seems to require a subsequent verb in the indicative. BDR § 442,2 offers examples of καί introducing verbs that are in the future, present, imperfect or aorist, depending on whether the result of the previous clause is envisaged as taking place in the future, present or past. All of these verbs are in the indicative, except two examples in which the verbs are in the infinitive. Both passages are spurious as examples of καί *consecutivum*. In Luke 5:1, BDR points to the Vulgate translation *cum ... intruerent ... ut audirent* as reflecting the consecutive force of ἐν τῷ ... ἐπικεῖσθαι ... καὶ ἀκούειν, but it is likely that the Latin translation here follows the variant reading τοῦ ἀκούειν. Similarly, ταῦτα ἔδει παθεῖν τὸν χριστὸν καὶ εἰσελθεῖν (Luke 24:26) allegedly expresses a consecutive relationship claimed to be captured by the Vulgate’s rendition of καὶ εἰσελθεῖν as *et ita intrare*. However, *ita* does not by itself indicate a con-

¹⁹ Johansson, “‘Who Can Forgive Sins’”, 363.

sequence but only a temporal sequence, which is presupposed in the passage also in Greek and then brought out explicitly in the Latin. There are, of course, other ways of attributing consecutive force to Greek infinitives, most conveniently by prefixing them with the genitive article τοῦ or with ὅσπερ. For the use of consecutive καί with the infinitive there is, by contrast, hardly any compelling evidence.

Johansson's proposed instances of the construction in Josephus do not alter the picture. Both Thackeray (LCL) and Feldman translate μεταβαλεῖν ... καί ... παρασχεῖν (*Ant.* 3.6) simply as 'to change... and to render'.²⁰ In *Ant.* 5.20, the only καί comes before the imperfect ἐώρταζον and appears to be naturally translated 'and'; in *J.W.* 2.237, nothing militates against construing ἀναχωρεῖν καὶ μὴ ... παροξύνειν as 'to return and not to provoke'. Even if one accepts, for the sake of the argument, that καί is indeed consecutive in these passages, they do not lend support to the suggestion that *Ant.* 6.92 could be read in a similar way. For in all four passages offered by BDR and Johansson as examples of καί *consecutivum* with an infinitive, the grammatical subject is identical with that of the infinitive preceding καί, whereas Johansson's reading of 6.92 presupposes a change of subjects from καταστήσαι to ἀφεῖναι. In *oratio recta*, such an unmarked change of subjects is fully normal: it would be unproblematic to understand τὸν θεὸν αὐτοῖς εὐμενῆ κατέστηεν καὶ ταύτην ἀφήκεν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν as 'he [Samuel] made God benevolent towards them, and he [God] forgave this sin'.²¹ This is not the case with infinitives, where the subject has to be spelled out, unless it can be self-evidently supplied from the governing clause.²² Attributing consecutive force to καί does not dispense from this basic rule, and a change of subjects from καταστήσαι to ἀφεῖναι would have to be marked by a noun or pronoun in the accusative. As no such word occurs in conjunction with ἀφεῖναι, I insist that the syntax hardly allows for taking anyone else than Samuel as the subject of this verb.

We must certainly distinguish, in principle, between what a passage in the *Antiquities* actually says on the one hand, and what Josephus himself wanted to communicate. Authors, ancient and modern, sometimes fail to

²⁰ Feldman = *Judean Antiquities 1-4* (trans. L. H. Feldman; vol. 3 of *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

²¹ Professor Otfried Hofius pointed out this in a letter to me, dated 9 September 2010.

²² BDR § 407 offers some examples of infinitive constructions where the implied subject is not spelled out, but none of them parallels *Ant.* 6.92.

convey their intention. Is it at all plausible that Josephus would have thought that prophets could forgive sins? Let us turn to this final, and semantic, question.

The Meaning of Forgiveness

As mentioned already, the dichotomy between divine and human forgiveness is not at home in early Jewish thinking. If Samuel is said to forgive a sin committed against God, then, this cannot be set in opposition to God's own act of forgiving: a prophet who forgives naturally does so in the secondary sense, that is, on behalf of God and in accordance with God's will. Samuel would forgive the people's sin by praying for and mediating God's forgiveness, the mediation of forgiveness here consisting in averting the punishment for the sin committed. Johansson objects to my view at two points. First of all, he points out that evidence is lacking for a prophetic ability to forgive sins on behalf of God elsewhere in Josephus, even in places where one would expect the notion to surface, had Josephus actually embraced it.²³ Secondly, according to Johansson, even if one should allow that Samuel forgives in the sense that I suggest, that activity is not comparable to what Jesus does in Mark 2:1–12; in other words, Samuel's prophetic right to forgive sins – if at all recognized by Josephus – does not equal Jesus' authority to forgive sins.²⁴ These are two different arguments, both of which need to be addressed.

Ant. 6.142–54, where Samuel's prayer for the forgiveness of Saul is rejected, cannot be used as an objection against my reading of 6.92. Johansson claims that Samuel here 'shows himself to be unable to forgive sins',²⁵ but the passage really confirms that Samuel's prophetic right to forgive must be understood in the sense already proposed, that is, as a right to mediate God's forgiveness. If God is not willing to forgive (primarily), then his prophet cannot forgive (secondarily).²⁶ A more serious, but hardly decisive, challenge is posed by the lack of any reference to Nathan 'forgiving' David's sin in *Ant.* 7.153, where Josephus only says that Nathan 'prophesied' that God had taken pity on David and had been reconciled to

²³ Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins'", 363.

²⁴ Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins'", 362.

²⁵ Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins'", 362.

²⁶ Josephus' statement that God refused to forgive because 'it is not just to forgive sins on the grounds of intercession' (*Ant.* 6.144) is perplexing in view of, e.g., 3.22–24; 6.92–93; 5.200–201. This is so regardless of one's interpretation of the crucial phrase in 6.92.

him. Although Johansson's claim that 'there is not even an absolution formula as in 2 Samuel'²⁷ is overstated, since the reference to the 'prophe-sying' of Nathan certainly implies verbal communication no less audacious than the phrasing of 2 Sam 12.13, he is of course right that my case would be considerably strengthened by the existence of another passage in Josephus where a prophet was made the subject of ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίαν. There is no such passage, so my suggestion that Josephus opted for this terminology in *Ant.* 6.92 to signal a prophetic offering of forgiveness on God's behalf will remain a hypothesis. On the other hand, arguments from silence are not often compelling, and in the present case, we are dealing with an expression that is indeed singular within the writings of Josephus. Regardless of which interpretation one favours of ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίαν in *Ant.* 6.92 – and I have already argued that the one advocated by Johansson is hardly possible in view of the grammar – the question why Josephus used the expression precisely here, and not elsewhere, will remain intriguing. My suggestion is that, as the normal Greek verb συγγινώσκειν would inevitably signal that the acting subject was presumed to forgive in the primary sense, Josephus – perhaps instinctively – opted for the Semitizing expression ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίαν, which has the broader potential of being used also in the secondary sense.

Even if one assumes that my reading of *Ant.* 6.92 is correct, Samuel's bringing about and mediating divine forgiveness does not fall within the same category as does Jesus' offering of forgiveness in Mark, according to Johansson. 'Samuel does not "forgive" in the sense Jesus does, whether Jesus personally forgives the paralytic's sins or he announces God's forgiveness. The same language may be used, but the meaning is clearly another'.²⁸ We can rephrase Johansson's criticism in the following way: Samuel forgives in the secondary sense; Jesus forgives in the primary sense. As far as one considers what Jesus himself says and does in Mark 2:1–12, however, the difference is far from evident. Jesus announces that the paralysed man's sins 'are forgiven' (ἀφιένται) – whether by God, by himself or by God through himself is not specified (2:5). As part of his reply to the scribes' fierce criticism, he states that he, as the Son of Man, has authority to forgive sins (ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας) on earth, and finally he heals the man in order to validate this claim (2:10–11). None of this indicates that Jesus forgives in a sense that differs significantly from what

²⁷ Johansson, "Who Can Forgive Sins", 363.

²⁸ Johansson, "Who Can Forgive Sins", 362.

Samuel is expected to do in Josephus. The verb ἀφιέναι can be readily understood in the secondary sense. Only the scribes' unspoken accusation brings in the dichotomized notion that Jesus' offering of forgiveness somehow competes with, indeed threatens, that of God (2:7) – put differently, they immediately assume that Jesus has used ἀφιέναι in the primary sense. This is why their reaction is so unexpected: nothing that Jesus has said or done goes beyond what some prophets of old had done, communicating their knowledge of God's willingness to forgive.

Within the Gospel of Mark itself, the reaction of the scribes serves to bring out a 'high' Christology. Mark certainly intends his audience to interpret Jesus' announcement along the same lines as do the scribes. For Mark, Jesus does not forgive in the secondary sense of that word, but in its primary sense, thus implying a unity between God and Jesus that surpasses every instance of prophetic intimacy with the divine. In *the narrative world of Mark*, then, 'to forgive' invariably means to forgive in the primary sense, and any one who does so claims to do what only God can do. By contrast, in *the real world of early Judaism*, as far as it can be reconstructed, the phrase 'Your sins are forgiven' cannot possibly have been taken as a blasphemous violation of God's prerogative,²⁹ and any 'authority to forgive sins' would naturally have been understood as an authority to forgive in the secondary sense. To argue for the *historical* realism of the scribes' criticism (which is how I understand the objective of Johansson's article) by pointing to the uniquely controversial nature of Jesus' bestowal of forgiveness is in fact to engage in circular reasoning, since the narrated controversy is entirely dependent on the dichotomy implied by Mark 2:7 itself. If we refrain from letting this historically improbable accusation influence our interpretation of Jesus' offering of forgiveness, then, we find that both Samuel and Jesus forgive sins in the secondary sense of averting the punishment for them – in the case of Jesus, by 'sending away' the paralysis of the man brought to him.

²⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 63; Maurice Casey, *The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem* (LNTS, 343; London: T & T Clark, 2007), 157, conclude similarly.

Conclusion: *Ant.* 6.92 and the Implausibility of Mark 2:7

There are many reasons to doubt the historical factualness of the scribal charge in Mark 2:7. For one thing, their accusation is unspoken, its contents being revealed only by an omniscient narrator – hardly a solid foundation for historical reconstruction! For another, the scribes' criticism instigates a controversy that culminates in Jesus' healing a paralysed man in order to prove his authority as the Son of Man, which conflicts with Jesus' refusal to perform 'signs' as a means of self-authentication (Mark 8:11–12; Q 11:16, 29). Finally, as pointed out already, the charge of blasphemy presupposes a dichotomy between divine and human forgiveness that is foreign to early Judaism as we know it from first-hand sources.

Interestingly, Mark 2:7 is in conflict not only with early Jewish literature, but also with other primitive and early Christian texts. Whereas Luke faithfully retains the charge of blasphemy in his rewriting of the Markan episode (Luke 5:21), in 7:48–49 Jesus' words 'Your sins are forgiven' elicit a much weaker response, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'. I have already mentioned John 20:23 as the clearest example of the double-sense use of 'to forgive'. It may also be interesting to note that Tertullian, as he discusses the ecclesial authority to forgive sins at the beginning of the third century, contends that 'also the prophets ... pardoned those who repented' (*et prophetae ... paenitentibus ignoverant, De pudicitia* 21.5). Mark 2:7 parr. is the *only* passage in early Jewish *and* primitive Christian literature that suggests that a human claim to forgive sins would compete with a prerogative of God. It is not difficult to see how the charge of blasphemy fits well both with the cycle of conflicts in Mark 2:1–3:6 and with the agenda of Mark's Gospel as a whole. The Galilean scribes and Pharisees are portrayed as Jesus' antagonists, whose hearts are hardened (3:5), who fail to see that sinners need to be cared for just like those who are ill (2:16–17), who cannot answer Jesus' question whether it is permitted to save life or to kill on a Sabbath (3:4) and who eventually decide to have Jesus destroyed (3:6). In short, we are dealing with a caricature, which as such is hardly without a basis in history, but also tends towards the extreme and exaggerated. The construal of Jesus' announcement of forgiveness as a blasphemous encroachment serves the agenda of presenting the scribes as a dark backdrop against which the authority of Jesus shines brightly. It also foreshadows the high priest's charge of blasphemy at Jesus' trial (14:64), signalling that Jesus' ministry was characterized by

conflict and opposition from its beginning to its end.³⁰ Mark 2:7 does not make sense as a historical recollection, but it makes perfect sense as a literary construction.

Ant. 6.92 corroborates what many scholars had already realized, namely, that the dichotomy between human and divine forgiveness is foreign to the thought world of early Judaism. It confirms that a true prophet of God can even be said to forgive sins in a sense that is no more intrinsically controversial than the priestly commission to bless on God's behalf. Who can forgive sins but God? No one, of course, but God can and does forgive sins through his prophets.

³⁰ See Martin Hengel, 'Probleme des Markusevangeliums', in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien: Vorträge vom Tübinger Symposium 1982* (ed. P. Stuhlmacher; WUNT 28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 221–65 (230–31).