

## A PROBLEMATIC MISSIONARY TEXT: *JOHN 20:23* AND THE ISSUE OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE TWO MAIN CLAUSES (ἀφίενται AND κεκράτηνται)

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**ABSTRACT.** One of the most central theological themes of Orthodoxy is sacerdotalism, the mystery of priesthood and its roots growing from this Johannine verse, in which apostles are sent to mission after they were invested with power to forgive the sins. The problem that occurs refers to the translation of the perfect that is found in the main clause in both sentences: ἀφήμι (“to let go, forgive”) and κρατέω (“to retain, to grasp”), which in some manuscripts of the New Testament (*Codex Sinaiticus*; *Codex Alexandrinus*; *Codex Bezae*) and in a few uncials and critical editions of the Greek New Testament (*Westcott and Hort*; *Nestle’s Greek New Testament*), appears to be perfect tense.

According to Greek New Testament grammars, the perfect tense pictures a past action, the result of which was present to the speaker or writer. So Jesus warned the disciples that they were to treat as forgiven only those that were already forgiven by God. According to this scenario, their entire mission summarizes the acts of authenticating the things that have already been made for them (in their name) and for the people. Our research deals with this issue, underlines the value of indicative present mood of this two verbs, as we encounter them in the byzantine manuscripts of the New Testament and also in *Codex Vaticanus*. The large context of the story deals with the action of breathing the Holy Spirit over the disciples, transforming them into a new existence and receiving power by this, to forgive or retain everyone’s sins, that is why I see the perfect tense as the result of a scribal error. The difference between the present ἀφίενται and the perfect ἀφέωνται consist of two letters changed, an error that might have occurred among the scribes.

Establishing the indicative present of the action is an urgent task for the world of orthodox biblical studies, because according to this prerequisite, our whole missionary agenda earns credits.

**Keywords:** perfect tense, indicative present, sacerdotalism, scribal errors, modern translations.

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## Introduction

The first scene when Christ Resurrected presents Himself to the Apostles happens right in the evening of the Resurrection in a place where the Apostles were hiding for fear of the Jewish leaders (*John* 20:19-25). Here through a symbolic action Christ breathed on the Apostles and they received the Holy Spirit, Who will manifest through them, offering them the power to forgive or not the peoples' sins: Ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας, ἀφίενται αὐτοῖς ἂν τινων κρατῆτε, κεκράτηνται ("If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" - 20:23)<sup>1</sup>. The use of the same verb (ἐμφυσάω – "to breathe") is not random, John the Evangelist uses the exact same verb which occurs when the creation of man is presented (*Genesis* 2:7<sup>2</sup>) and also in the vision of prophet Ezekiel when God commands him to prophesy to the Spirit to breathe over the valley of dry bones in order to resurrect them (*Ezekiel* 37:9<sup>3</sup>). What the subsidiary text wishes to transmit to us is precisely the change in the personality of the Apostles, resurrected by the Holy Spirit to a new life, an action which is characteristic for the day of Resurrection. Their role from this moment on is clearly outlined, that is to preach the Gospel of Jesus to all the peoples, which is why this text of John is one with a profound missionary character.

The problems regarding this text occur when researchers such as J. R. Mantey<sup>4</sup> and Morton S. Enslin<sup>5</sup> speaks about the two main clauses that appear in several important manuscripts of the New Testament using the Perfect Tense (a<sup>c</sup> A D), such as ἀφέωνται, κεκράτηνται respectively. They said that these clauses give the impression from a grammatical point of view, that the intervention of the priest in the problem of forgiveness of the sins is unnecessary,

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<sup>1</sup> Stelian Tofană, *Introducere în studiul Noului Testament: Evangheliile după Luca și Ioan. Problema sinoptică* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2001), 332; Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont, *The New Testament in the Original Greek. Byzantine Textform* (Southborough: Chilton Book Publishing, 2005), 245; Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Renașterea, 2009), 1581.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazianzus states that our soul is the very breath (ἐμφυσάω) of God, a divine substance mixed with a terrestrial one, a ray of light closed in a cage, but one which is completely divine and unchangeable. See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Dogmatic Hymns VII*, PG 37, 446.

<sup>3</sup> The bones were intact but they needed life, a final act of power had to bring them to resurrection, this happens under the action of the Spirit (ruah) of God, who breathes and wakes to a new life the whole humankind. See G.A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, in *International Critical Commentary*, ed. J.A. Emerton et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951), 399.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the perfect Tense in John 20:23, Mt 16:19 and Mt 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 243.

<sup>5</sup> Morton S. Enslin, "The Perfect Tense in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 55 (1936): 129.

as they have already been forgiven. According to the Greek grammars<sup>6</sup>, the Perfect Tense presents a past action which has ended before the moment in which it is presented to the reader, or it presents the logical continuation of an accomplished action, from which it results that Jesus Christ warns His Disciples that they have to forgive also those who have been already forgiven by God. According to this scenario, the mission of the bishop or priest is limited to the point where they just observe an already consumed reality, that of forgiveness of the sins, their job being only that of an appointed observer.

Our research will focus on this precise matter of the two main clauses, insisting upon the Byzantine tradition of the manuscripts and on *Codex Sinaiticus* which offers a different perspective of the mission of the Apostles, by proposing the Future Indicative (αφεθησεται) and of the Present Indicative respectively (αφιενται), and which also offers support to the theology of the priesthood. Another example which will reinforce the traditional interpretative line will be the underlining of the Aorist Subjunctive (αφῆτε) that can have no logical grammatical value in our text, if it's placed right beside the verb in the perfect Tense ἀφέωνται.

### **The two main clauses: ἀφιενται (“are forgiven”) and κεκράτηνται (“are not forgiven”)**

Researcher J. R. Mantey<sup>7</sup> states that the fact that the subsequent scribes modified the Perfect ἀφέωνται into the Present Indicative ἀφιενται respectively into the Future Indicative αφεθησεται as it can be found in a and in the Tischendorf<sup>8</sup> edition, altering the original text, precisely to maintain unyieldingly the doctrine of the priesthood. The grammatical difference between the perfect and the present of the verbs is given by the change of two letters: ίε respectively έω – for the first variant priesthood and the theology of forgiveness of sins as action characteristic to the bishop or priest having biblical support. Of course, these variants of text are the result of the errors the scribes made unintentionally in most of the cases, but they might as well occur generated by certain theological premises<sup>9</sup>. The main variants of text are the following:

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Blass, *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1905), 198-99; Jeremy Duff, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 179-80; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 175-76.

<sup>7</sup> J. R. Mantey, “The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23”, 244.

<sup>8</sup> Helen and Kirsopp Lake, *Codex Sinaiticus Petropolitanus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 161; Constantinus Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine* (Hermann Mendelssohn, 1858), 418.

<sup>9</sup> David Noel Freedman and David Miano, “Slip of the Eye: Accidental Omission in the Masoretic Tradition”, in *The Challenge of Bible Translation*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2003), 273-84.

- a: Αν τινων αφηται τας αμαρτιας αφεθησεται<sup>10</sup> αυτοις εαν δε τινων κρατηνται κεκρατηνται
- A: εαν τινων αφητε τας αμαρτιας αφεωνται<sup>11</sup> αυτοις εαν τινων κρατητε καικρατηνται
- B<sup>b</sup>: αν τινος αφητε τας αμαρτιας αφιενται<sup>12</sup> αυτοις αν τινος κρατητε κεκρατηνται<sup>13</sup>

As one may observe the main text differences are given by the three tenses of the verbs, depending on the manuscript that we use: in the Past we have the Perfect αφεωνται which negates any sacerdotal dimension of the text; in the Present we have the Indicative αφιενται which refers to the action of clergy that of forgiving peoples' sins and we also have the version using the Future αφεθησεται which places the entire action in a possible future. Establishing the original expression is a difficult task, which can only be solved, if we initiate several important steps.

### **Establishing the original version of the first main clause (αφεωνται or αφιενται)**

The "theory of substitution" is very well known in the field of the textual criticism of the New Testament, it refers to the biblical fragments in

<sup>10</sup> This verb which is in the Future Indicative is used most of the times in situations reserved to the Aorist Subjunctive which offers only the contemplation of an action which is theoretically achievable, so it is also possible that the action does not take place anymore. In our case it may be translated by "will be forgiven" in a possible and definite future, but only on condition that the priests offer forgiveness, because the Aorist Subjunctive αφητε which is translated correctly by "if you forgive", refers to the action of the clergy. The same grammatical value can be found in the text from 4:14, where the Future Indicative δώσω "I will give [him]" comes in close relationship with the Aorist Subjunctive πίη "if [one] will drink". And these two main clauses can have a logical meaning only in this interdependency: Christ will offer living water in a definite future only to the one that will ask for it. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 571.

<sup>11</sup> According to the value of Perfect of the verb, it results that the action of forgiveness of the sins has already been given and that the Apostles are only given this power to confirm before God this reality, while they become static subjects, without an active intervention.

<sup>12</sup> The verb αφιενται in the Present Indicative, the most common textual version in the world of manuscripts can be correctly translated by "are forgiven". It is important to note that despite the text accepted by most of the critical editions of the New Testament which use the variant of the Perfect αφέωνται, the famous critical edition IGNTP IV establishes the Present αφιενται as the original version acknowledged in the Greek text which it proposes. See *The New Testament in Greek IV: The Gospel According to St. John*, in *The American and British Committees of the International Greek New Testament Project*, vol. 2: *The Majuscules*, ed. U.B. Schmid et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 538.

<sup>13</sup> The final main clause κεκράτηνται most commonly used in the majority of the manuscripts has the value of Perfect, passive voice, which shows that the subject suffers passively the complete action of not having the sins forgiven, an action approved by Jesus Christ Himself. That is why, the accurate translation is the following: "are not forgiven", respecting both the Perfect and the passive.

which a word or an entire phrase is replaced by the scribes with another version. The need to harmonize the text was the argument of many copyists, but we can certainly talk about other tendencies as well. Researchers K. Elliott and I. Moir<sup>14</sup> think that in order to solve this problem, a few methodological steps are necessary: establishing the broad context of the studied episode, following the theological developments from within the Church, studying the history of the text's effects within the church environment etc. These are several directions that we will try to consider, but we will also analyze the variety of textual versions, we will interpret the text from a grammatical and theological point of view, extracting valuable information in our attempt to establish the version which is closest in meaning to John's original.

The first proof regarding priesthood are the internal testimonies of the text, the action of breathing (ἐνεφύσησεν) of Jesus Christ, announce a new reality, a change in the Apostles' condition, for they receive the power to forgive sins through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel according to John presents a special sacramental interest, the bread is perceived by Saint John as body of Jesus Christ offered for our eternal life (6:53), as well as the water comes into close relationship with the Holy Baptism (3:5), excepting a few cases (4:10-15; 7:37-39). These sacramental realities were perceived by Saint John in the exact same manner in which another reality, that of forgiveness of sins, was perceived by the first Christians<sup>15</sup>. "John's Pentecost" from (20:23) has no other parallel in the Gospels, but seems rather an independent version<sup>16</sup> of that from (*Acts 2*) and the contribution of Saint John in the field of pneumatology is important: the Spirit is called "Advocate", a truth that Saint John receives through direct revelation<sup>17</sup>. It becomes important to mention that only after the moment when Christ replaces the Apostles in key missionary positions, He breathes over them the Holy Spirit, thus receiving the power to forgive peoples' sins, but also the grace necessary in

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<sup>14</sup> Keith Elliott and Ian Moir, *Manuscripts and the Text of the New Testament: An Introduction for English Readers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 50.

<sup>15</sup> Clarence T. Craig, "Sacramental Interest in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 35; Ruben Zimmermann, "Symbolic Communication between John and His Reader: The Garden Symbolism in John 19-20", in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*, ed. Tom Thatcher et al. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 222: "In John's language, the symbols cancel the difference between the world from above and that from the earth, without losing their value, others represent the value of sacramental dimensions. In general, John's symbolism may be thus systematized: metaphorically, narratively, with double meaning, ironical, thematic, biblical and sacramental".

<sup>16</sup> Some researchers state that this breath of Holy Spirit over the Apostles is nothing else than an anticipation of the descending of the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost (*Acts 2*), but this doesn't mean that the Spirit was not present within the Apostles before this grand event from the history of Christianity (John 7:39; 14:16-17). See *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2070.

<sup>17</sup> C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 144.

order to remain pillars of the Christian faith<sup>18</sup>. We are talking of a functional communication of the Spirit, says A. Scrima<sup>19</sup>, offered to the Apostles with the precise purpose to help them fulfill a specific role which belongs to Saint John's vision on the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ came to take away the sin of the world (*John* 1:29), and now with the help of the same Spirit, the disciples and Apostles will have, based on their mission entrusted to them by Christ (20:21), the mission to decide whose sins will be forgiven and whose will not be. In fact, they receive the mission to let the Spirit work, their job being only to decide between those whose faith in God grew stronger, and those who lack this type of knowledge. Hence, the answer of those who will listen to the Gospel, will be of great importance in the matter of forgiveness of sins committed up to that moment; either they will believe and will be forgiven and invited to a new life through the breath (ἐμφυσάω) of the Spirit, or they will remain dead in their sins<sup>20</sup>. And through this direct consecration and through the apostolic succession, Christ's own Priesthood is communicated to the priests and bishops of the Church<sup>21</sup>. Another important aspect is the presence of the passive voice of the two main clauses (to forgive/not to forgive), functioning as divine passives, emphasizing the fact that God is the One Who forgives all sins, of course, according to the intervention of the Apostles<sup>22</sup>.

The version in the Present Indicative ἀφιενται<sup>23</sup> remains the most quoted and most present in the manuscripts and lectionaries of the New Testament (B<sup>2</sup> K N W Γ Δ Θ 078. 33. 700. 892<sup>s</sup>. 1241. 1424 and most of the manuscripts of Syrian tradition<sup>24</sup>), but also in the writings of the Fathers of the Church<sup>25</sup> (Origen, Eusebius, Serapion, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem,

<sup>18</sup> Gitte Buch-Hansen, *It is the Spirit that Gives Life. A Stoic Understanding of Pneuma in John's Gospel*, in *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, vol. 173, ed. James D.G. Dunn et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 399.

<sup>19</sup> André Scrima, *Comentariu Integral la Evanghelia după Ioan* (București: Humanitas, 2008), 394.

<sup>20</sup> J.M.C. Scott, *John*, in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D.G. Dunn et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 1209.

<sup>21</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible*, ed. Eugen Pentiu et al. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 1465.

<sup>22</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Ioan: Introducere și comentariu* (Oradea: Editura Scriptum, 2010), 391.

<sup>23</sup> Researcher B. Metzger states that both the Present ἀφιενται and the future ἀφεθησεται are nothing else than subsequent simplifications of the scribes, with the purpose to clear the text, when in fact they weaken it. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 255.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara and Kurt Aland et al., *The Greek-English New Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, <sup>28</sup>2012), 746.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, <sup>5</sup>2014), 391. The version in the Perfect Indicative ἀφρωνται can be found only in a few manuscripts and lectionaries (a<sup>2</sup> A D 050. 33<sup>vid</sup>. 205. 565) and only in the works of a few Fathers of the Church (John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria and John Damascene), but the version which forms the Future Indicative ἀφεθησεται can be found in the works of many Fathers of the Church (in the works of Origen translated in Latin, in the works of Ambrose of Milan in three out of five occurrences, in the works of Jerome in one of the three occurrences, in the works of Augustin in fourteen of the nineteen occurrences, Novatian, Cyprian of Carthage, Pseudo-Priscilla, Gaudentius, Niceta), but also in "Itala", "Vulgate", in the Syrian, Armenian and Coptic tradition of the translations of John's Gospel.

Didymus the Blind, Severus, Cyril of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, Augustin). Because of the fact that ἀφιεῖνται (“are forgiven”) is the textual version most present in the Church’s conscience, and because the difference between this and the perfect ἀφεῶνται is given by only two letters changed inside the word, that is ιε / εω, we are entitled to suspect the presence of some errors of the scribes, intentional or not. Researcher J. Royse<sup>26</sup> is skeptical regarding the accuracy of the technique used to copy the Gospel according to John, the scribe shows a lot of subjectivity for he not only copies the words, but sees beyond the language, to the content of the text and multiplies it usually using his own words, changing the text according to his own taste (227 such creations are identified<sup>27</sup>).

The verse starts with the particle ἄν which we will translate with “if”, and which may also mean “when [you will forgive<sup>28</sup>]”. The indefinite pronoun τινῶν which we will translate with “whose” replaces the plural, but there is enough textual coverage to be able to use the singular “to the one<sup>29</sup>”. The stress falls on the Subjunctive Aorist verb ἀφῆτε “[if] you forgive”, which has the role of underlining the real author of the actions, everything remains up to the decision of the Apostles. From a grammatical point of view, the Aorist targets the action as a whole, without determining its debut or ending. The Subjunctive is one of the three virtual modes of the Greek language, and in comparison with the Optative which translates the action offering it the certainty of its accomplishment, the Subjunctive communicates a possible action, contemplated theoretically as achievable. The Aorist Subjunctive, since it does not carry temporal information, is translated exactly like Present Subjunctive, the difference being in terms of aspect<sup>30</sup>, that is why the correct translation is: “[if] you forgive”. As one may

<sup>26</sup> James R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri*, in *New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents*, vol. 36, ed. Bart D. Ehrman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 123.

<sup>27</sup> Another error of transcription can be found close to the studied text, in 20:11, where according to several manuscripts, Mary Magdalene stood outside the tomb and cried (Μαρία δὲ εἰστήκει πρὸς τῷ μνημείῳ ἔξω κλαίουσα), but if we follow the witness it results that she stood crying inside the tomb (Μαριαμ δε ἰστηκει εν τω μνημιω κλαιουσα). The dilemma is if the adverb ἔξω (“outside”) is the original version or it’s the mere result of an arbitrary intervention. See John William Burgon, *The Causes of the Corruption of the Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels*, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 90.

<sup>28</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 107.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, in *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 29A, ed. William Foxwell Albright et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1023.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the basics*, 461-62; Robert E. Van Voorst, *Building your New Testament Greek Vocabulary* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 32001), 86; Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 393-96; Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), 17-31. Erich Happ et al., *Grammatik. Lautlehre, Formenlehre, Satzlehre* (München: Bayerischer Schulbuch Verlag, 1981), 47.

very easily observe, the forgiveness of the sins of people depends on the forgiveness that the Apostles must give, and according to this construction of Saint John, which uses the Subjunctive, it results that without the forgiveness offered by the servants of the Church through the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ does not forgive peoples' sins. That is why the verb in the Perfect Indicative  $\alpha\phi\epsilon\omega\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  which communicates an action that ended and is irrevocable for the present observer, has nothing to do with the theological of this construction which chooses to use as time of the development of the action the Aorist Subjunctive. The most plausible version, from a grammatical point of view, is that of the Present Indicative  $\alpha\phi\iota\epsilon\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  which can emphasize on its own, the role of the Subjunctive  $\acute{\alpha}\phi\eta\tau\epsilon$  which may also mean a definitive act of forgiveness<sup>31</sup>, and implicitly the role of the clergy in this matter of forgiving the sins of the people. If the Perfect Indicative would be the original version, then the Subjunctive no longer makes a point in this text at least<sup>32</sup>, because then we would have a lacking of an logical and theological meaning, but  $\acute{\alpha}\phi\eta\tau\epsilon$  is present in all the manuscripts that we have access to at the moment, which means that the priests and bishops who are in the Holy Spirit, have a key role in this matter. But let us not forget the divine passive of the verbs<sup>33</sup>, which aim to the action performed by Christ, that is why we may paraphrase the text as follows: "When you forgive the sins of the people, in that exact moment God forgives them too, and they are forgiven for good<sup>34</sup>".

An interesting answer is given by Professor H. Cadbury, who, as opposed to us, follows the direction of the perfect  $\alpha\phi\epsilon\omega\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  and yet he reaches the same result of the presence of priesthood within the text. The perfects from the text may be found in the apodosis of several general conditionals introduced by the particle  $\acute{\alpha}\nu$   $\tau\upsilon\omega\nu$ . The general conditionals are difficult to limit to the verbal tenses and it's not even the case as Cadbury suggests<sup>35</sup>. The question is whether

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<sup>31</sup> Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906), 377.

<sup>32</sup> In the twin text of *Matthew* 16, 19 those two verbs  $\delta\epsilon\delta\epsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\nu$  ("bind") respectively  $\lambda\epsilon\lambda\upsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\nu$  ("loose") are perfect tenses followed by subjunctives. In contrast to *John* 20, 23 this logical construct underlines an theological sacramental one also, because this two verbs are passive future perfects, according to this scheme: "if you bind on earth... will have been tied up". But this kind of action must not be understand like R. France propose, that when Peter makes his decision it will be found to have been already made in heaven, making him not the initiator of new directions for the Church, but the faithful steward of God's prior decisions. See in respect R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 2007), 626-27.

<sup>33</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1206.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1024.

<sup>35</sup> Henry J. Cadbury, "The Meaning of John 20: 23, Matthew 16: 19 and Matthew 18: 18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 251.



a perfect from the apodosis indicates an action or a condition anterior to the time used in the protasis; that this is not the case is shown by the texts from (*I John 2:5; Jacob 2:10; Romans 14:23; 13:8*). We may say for sure that the action or the condition implied by the perfect is not always prior to the other clause. Similar examples of this perfect may be found in (*Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39*) which are in fact “perfects for a Future Perfect”, and in this category we may also include *John 20:23*<sup>36</sup>. What professor Cadbury means is that even if we choose the Perfect  $\alpha\phi\epsilon\omega\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  we make no mistake regarding the nuance of priesthood imposed by this text, for in the majority of cases, the perfect used in apodosis, in our case: “have already been forgiven”, does not necessarily indicate the ending of this action at the moment of the actual observer, nor an action prior to the verb from protasis, in our case the forgiveness of sins. Hence, the presence of this perfect does not indicate that the sins have already been forgiven by God and that the priests only have to certify this truth, as some scholars suggest, because the ending of the action of forgiving the sins is not given by this perfect  $\alpha\phi\epsilon\omega\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  but by the inspired decision of the clergy to act in this respect – hence the logical presence of the Subjunctive  $\acute{\alpha}\phi\eta\tau\epsilon$ . Professor Cadbury’s intervention is salutary, but we will not consider it to be thoroughgoing because this principle of the perfects from the apodosis does not subscribe to the whole content of the New Testament. There are cases in which the same perfect from the apodosis indicate the completion of the action and which may be found in texts such as (*Matthew 16:19; 18:18; Luke 5:20; 7:47* etc.).

The occurrence of the Perfect  $\alpha\phi\epsilon\omega\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  in several important manuscripts of the New Testament with special reference to the text from *John 20:23*, can be only the result of certain intrusions, through which the scribes, probably motivated on a theological level, decided to change the grammatical value of the verb, inculcating the idea that only those sins which have been firstly forgiven directly by Christ will also be forgiven by the clergy of the Church<sup>37</sup>. A

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<sup>36</sup> Henry J. Cadbury, “The Meaning of John 20: 23,” 252.

<sup>37</sup> Other interventions of theological sublayer in the history of the Church are well known, we will never know for sure who were the authors and how many subjective interventions left behind, but we may guess their motifs. They are mainly of doctrinaire nature, and occur during the Christological disputes of the first Christian centuries, and many of the Fathers of the Church (Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, Eusebius) accused the heretics of this practice to falsify the words of the Scripture, with the purpose to support their wrong teachings. For example, towards the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Marcion sets aside all the Judaic background of Christ’s activity and teaching, from his copies of the Gospel according to Luke; Tatian in his work on the harmony of the Gospels, performs numerous interventions on the text, through which he offers support to his ascetical view regarding the universal Christianity. See Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament. Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 265-66; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture. The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 274.

decision which overthrows the Church's tradition up to that moment<sup>38</sup>, which minimizes the role of the priest and confessor, but also that of the Confession and which endangers the true mission of the Church by negating the sacerdotal dimension of the Christian cult.

The patristic tradition too is on the side of priesthood when it interprets this text<sup>39</sup>, Theodore of Mopsuestia states that this power to forgive or not the peoples' sins belongs only to God, but He offered with generosity this authority to those who serve Him<sup>40</sup>. Ambrose of Milan states that this power was entrusted only to priests and bishops of the Church, and the heretics that do not have Christ's priesthood do not have the right to claim this great gift<sup>41</sup>. John Chrysostom is the most profound of all when he says that God did not offer this honor to angels or to archangels, but He offered it to men, to them He says that everything that will not be forgiven on earth will not be forgiven in heaven. What priests do on earth, Christ certifies in Heaven<sup>42</sup>. Gregory the Great speaks about the apostles as men who have been granted the level of divine judgement, for Christ confirms what they forgive or not in earth, because those who feared the rightful judgement of Jesus Christ have been consecrated as judges of the nations, and they are replaced nowadays within the Church by bishops. For those who have received the burden of conducting Christ's Church, also received the power to forgive the sins<sup>43</sup>.

Taking into account all the data obtained, we may conclude the following: the original version of the first Johannian clause, from a grammatical, historical and theological point of view, cannot be other than  $\alpha\phi\iota\epsilon\nu\tau\alpha\iota$  that is the present "are forgiven". Hence, we propose the following text:

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<sup>38</sup> The text from *James* 5:15 speaks clearly to this respect, presenting the Church's conception on this matter of forgiveness of sins:  $\kappa\acute{\alpha}\nu \acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma \eta \pi\epsilon\pi\omega\iota\kappa\acute{\omega}\varsigma, \acute{\alpha}\phi\epsilon\theta\acute{\eta}\sigma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omega}$  "if they have sinned, they will be forgiven". The text is obvious, the Christians who are ill physically and spiritually because of their sins, are obliged to call on the priest of the Church to pray for them and by this, they will receive healing, which is the natural consequence of the forgiveness of sins. Both Origen and Saint John Chrysostom, when interpreting this verse, have emphasized the importance of priests in the act of forgiving the sins of the people. See Caesar Aronet, "Ungerea în contextul Iacob 5," *Teologie și Viață* 22 (2012): 152-53.

<sup>39</sup> We will take this data from the famous work of patristic orientation Joel C. Elowsky, *John 11-21*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament*, vol. IVb, ed. Thomas C. Oden et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 298.

<sup>40</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on John 7.20*, in *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, fourth series, vol. 3, ed. Bernard Coulie et al. (Louvain: Université catholique de Louvain, 1903), 357.

<sup>41</sup> Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance 1.2.6-7*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff et al. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 330.

<sup>42</sup> John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 71-73.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, in: *Cistercian Studies Series*, vol. 123, edited by M. Basil Pennington, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1973), 204.

Ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας, ἀφίενται αὐτοῖς· ἄν τινων κρατῆτε, κεκράτηνται: If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven (*John* 20:23).

### The forgiveness of sins in the context of an authentic mission

In the synoptic accounts regarding the event of Christ's appearance to His disciples, we identify a general tendency to image a general missionary area: in the Gospel according to Luke the tendency is to preach the forgiveness of sins; in the Gospel according to Matthew the tendency is to baptize, and in the epilogue of the Gospel according to Mark both preaching of the Gospel and Baptism are underlined<sup>44</sup>. In *John* 20:23 we find an elaborate Johannian formula, and from this point of view, we may say that *John* 20:23 completes *Luke* 24:47<sup>45</sup> just as *Mark* 16:16<sup>46</sup> consolidates the spectrum from *Matthew* 28:19<sup>47</sup>. The forgiveness of sins in Saint John's view becomes a *sine qua non* condition in the mission entrusted to the disciples and Apostles to preach the Gospel to all the nations, perfecting the catechetical and baptismal activity. The Johannian context for the entrusting of the mission, as opposed to that from *Matthew* 16:19 is in the period right after Christ's resurrection (20:21) and that of the offering of the Holy Spirit (20:22) to the apostles and disciples that were present, which proves the continuation of Christ's missionary activity within the world by His Apostles and disciples<sup>48</sup>. And from here it results a double dimension of the Christian mission: that of declaring both the redemption and the judgement<sup>49</sup>. The fact that their sending to fulfil the mission is compared with the sending of the Son by the Father, announces a different missionary dispatch than that with which we were accustomed by the synoptics, that is continuing the grand mission that Christ began within the world, understood now from the perspective of its sacramental

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<sup>44</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1030.

<sup>45</sup> καὶ κηρυχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ μετάνοιαν εἰς ἅφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, ἀρξάμενοι ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ "and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem".

<sup>46</sup> ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται, ὁ δὲ ἀπιστήσας κατακριθήσεται "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned".

<sup>47</sup> πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

<sup>48</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, edited by D.A. Carson, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 655.

<sup>49</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 36, ed. Bruce M. Metzger et al. (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1999), 383.

dimension<sup>50</sup>. Hence, the apostles are now protectors of the divine sacraments as Saint Cyril of Alexandria calls them<sup>51</sup>.

If we complete this Johannian text with the one that we mentioned from Matthew, we identify a key missionary nuance. In *Matthew* 28:28 the Savior says: “All authority has been given to me” (ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία), so with this power the apostles and disciples are invested in order to fulfil their mission. The force of this mission is overlooked because of the wrong translation into Romanian of the noun ἐξουσία which means more than just power, its correct translation underlines the absolute authority or power<sup>52</sup> of the clergy to act within the world according to the extent of Christ’s mission, with a particular reference in the matter of forgiveness of sins. Of great importance is the fact that the mission is entrusted under the auspices of the Holy Spirit, and the issue of the forgiveness of sins is a special gift of the Spirit, that is why the apostles and disciples cannot act independently in this matter, but only inspired by the Holy Spirit<sup>53</sup>.

Christ told His Apostles a lot of their future mission long before this episode of breathing the Holy Spirit over them took place, and He also announced all that the Holy Spirit will do for them (14:12-14; 15:18-16:13), so there is little to add. But what Christ adds during that evening, that is the gift of forgiving the sins by them, exceeds all the other things, fulfilling what he had previously promised, that whoever believes in Him will do even greater things than those He did<sup>54</sup> (14:12). This practice to forgive sins was a main feature in the Christian mission of the early Church, and to this respect Origen’s testimony is indisputable (*Comm. in Mt. XII. 14*), he says that the bishops received from the apostles the power to forgive or not the sins of the people<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Stelian Tofană, “Jesus Appearance to the Ten Disciples and its Theological Dimension (John 20: 19-23). An Orthodox exegetical perspective,” *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa* 52 (2007): 23.

<sup>51</sup> Chiril al Alexandriei, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, PSB 41, (Bucureşti: EIBMBOR, 2000), 1154.

<sup>52</sup> Stelian Tofană, “Centralitatea Evangheliei lui Iisus Hristos în viaţa lumii – o perspectivă biblică”, in *Credinţă și Mărturisire. Istorie și Actualitate*, ed. Valer Bel et al. (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012), 29.

<sup>53</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953), 460.

<sup>54</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 1013.

<sup>55</sup> J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 2, in *The International Critical Commentary*, ed. Alfred Plummer et al. (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1976), 678-79.

## Conclusions

The tendencies of the modern biblical criticism converge to the attack of the main dogmas of the tradition of the early Christian Church, amongst which the priesthood. Researchers have tried to rebuild a lost Johannian original, insist on including into the *textus receptus* of a perfect that does nothing else but to overturn the Church's practice of almost two thousand years, although their textual and grammatical support is poor, and the historical and theological support is almost inexistent. The problematic Perfect Indicative *αφεωνται* seems to suggest that the sins of all the people from the course of the history prior to Christ, post Christ respectively, are already forgiven by Christ, in a magical manner, and the role of the bishops and priests is reduced only to take act of this. A perspective which is close to ridiculous, as it comes in contradiction with the testimonies of the Fathers of the Church from the centuries right after the early Church.

The textual and patristic support of the perfect *αφεωνται* "have been forgiven", as we have already proven, is insufficient, the versions kept in most of the manuscripts of the New Testament, use the Present Indicative most often *ἀφίενται* "are forgiven", or the Future *αφεθησεται* "will be forgiven", both indicating the sacramental value of the text of Saint John and implicitly the direct role of the clergy in the matter of forgiving the sins of the people. After a brief patristic survey, we noticed that almost all the fathers of the Church use the version with the present of the verb in their commentaries, except for John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria and John Damascene. But none of the three doubt the power that Christ offered His Apostles and disciples to forgive the sins of the people.

Besides, based on the research of Professor H. Cadbury, we observed that a perfect from apodosis, in our case (*αφεωνται*) does not indicate for all the cases an action or a condition prior to the other clause, and thus, according to our case, it does not mean that the sins have already been forgiven by Christ at the moment when the Apostles or the disciples identify them within the people. Hence, says Cadbury, we may speak about the sacerdotal value of the text even in the case of the use of the Perfect *αφεωνται*.

Recuperating the sacramental dimension of the text becomes a stringent task in the context of the mission of the Church today, when the missionary activity of the priest is more and more assailed and promoted. Acknowledging the priest's authority to forgive or not the sins of the people means to acknowledge the authority of the One who sent him to mission in order to complete the soteriological work that he started (*John 20:22*).

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