What “Mercies of God”?
Oiktirmos in Romans 12:1 against Its Septuagintal Background

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In what is considered to be a climactic point in Romans, in 12:1–2 Paul makes a firm appeal in view of “the mercies of God.” It is the conclusion of many scholars that Paul is using the language of mercy (oiktirmos) either to refer to the argument of Rom 9–11 or, perhaps, to summarize chapters 1–11 as a whole. Though the term is undoubtedly acting to refer back to Paul’s argument in the preceding material, there is a pattern of the usage of oiktirmos (and its cognates) in the LXX that has not been introduced into the scholarly discussion. We will examine the patterned use of oiktirmos in the LXX with a view toward how and why it appears as well as what other concepts are frequently and naturally correlated. Then we will demonstrate how suitable this specific term was for Paul in relating the mercy of God to the injunctions in 12:1–2. In particular, we will observe how oiktirmos appears in the discussion of God’s covenant faithfulness with a view toward revelation, forgiveness, and deliverance.

Key Words: Romans, mercy, compassion, Septuagint, revelation, forgiveness, deliverance

INTRODUCTION

There is, perhaps, no ethical injunction more well-known in the letters of Paul than found in Rom 12:1: “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” What tends to be downplayed are the five words before the formal exhortation: διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ. A prima facie reading might lead to the simple conclusion that Paul is basing a committed response to God on his own gracious initiative—offer yourself to God because he has shown grace and mercy to you. There is good reason, though, to

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take pause and inspect this phrase closely as something unique to Romans and tied to the preceding chapters more intentionally. In the first place, one would not have expected διὰ + [genitive] but rather a more obviously causal conjunction, if this phrase were relating the offering of the bodily sacrifice as a reaction to God’s prior act of grace. ¹ A second consideration, more significant, is the use of the word mercy. ² Moreover, the word here is not ἔλεος which is found 10 times in the Pauline corpus, and three times in Romans, but it is οἰκτιρμός. This noun is found only here in Romans and again only once more by Paul in terms of God’s mercy (2 Cor 1:3).

Scholars who have given this phrase some attention have disagreed over its referent. Is it God’s mercy in general, his mercy as outlined in Rom 1–11 as a whole, his mercy according to 9–11, or just in ch. 11? ³ How does one begin to weigh these options when competent Romans scholars have made reasonable cases for each one? This article intends to deal with these questions. Most importantly, how should we interpret the “mercies of God” in 12:1, and to what does this phrase refer, especially with a view toward the argumentation of Romans? An important consideration on which we will be building our argument is the significant roles that οἰκτιρμός and its verbal cognate οἰκτίρω play in the LXX. Many commentators have noted the fact that Paul’s use of the plural form οἰκτιρμῶν is a “Septuagintalism”

1. That interpreters seem to take the phrase causally can be seen in a number of translations, including the NIV, which translates it as “in view of God’s mercy.” The implication is that, once the believer has taken into account the great mercy of God, the resultant response should be self-sacrifice. Again, this interpretation is made even more explicit in the NLT: “because of all he has done for you.” No doubt, there are occasions where it would seem that Paul bases an injunction on the appropriate response to God, as in Rom 15:7, where believers are to receive one another “just as Christ has welcomed you.” Certainly, they are meant to welcome in the same manner, but this seems to go even further to viewing it as a natural response to God’s initiative. The challenge with Rom 12:1a is that a causal view of the conjunction would not be a typical usage of this particular construction.

2. While Paul does not have a default term he uses when he sets human action and response against the backdrop of divine action in Christ (see Phil 2:5–11, 2 Cor 8:9), one might expect human action to respond to God’s “grace,” or “love,” these being more frequently referred to in Paul than “mercy.”


Schlier is unique, perhaps, in tracing the theme of God’s mercy primarily back to Romans 5–8; see H. Schlier, Der Romerbrief (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1977).
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(a mimicking of the Hebrew רחמים). Due specifically to its prominence in the LXX and its rarity elsewhere in Paul, we will argue that the literary pattern within which it is found in the LXX is formative for Paul’s use of the term in Rom 12 and, in light of this pattern, it is a suitable representative term for how he describes the actions of God through and as a result of the Christ event.

We will begin by adumbrating the use of οἰκτιρμός (and οἰκτίρω) in the LXX, highlighting especially the rhetorical pattern of its employment with respect to the “mercy of God.” What we will discover is that this term is frequently used in reference to the covenant faithfulness of God. Three specific associated meanings are found under this rubric of God’s covenantal commitment to mercy: his mercy of divine self-revelation, his mercy of forgiveness, and his mercy of deliverance from captors and calamity. These three “mercies” of God are not exclusive. Often they interpenetrate. We will only be distinguishing them for heuristic purposes.

The Thematic and Rhetorical Use of οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω in the LXX

The fact of the matter is that οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω appear more than 70 times in the LXX, most of which pertain to the “mercy” of God. Below, we will highlight three categories of use.

God’s Revelatory Mercy

The foundation for understanding the revelatory mercy of God is undoubt-
edly Exod 33:19, where the Lord agrees to let all his “goodness” pass before Moses. He informs Moses that he will proclaim his own name before him and announces, “I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” Here, the word for “mercy” is ἐλεέω and “compassion” is οἰκτίρω in the LXX. It is quite obvious that these two verbs complement one another in meaning and serve, together, to intensify the notion that, when God invokes his own name, mercy echoes throughout the world. I will say more about this text when we come to Paul, as he finds good reason to quote Exod 33:19 in Rom 9:15.

Though not as foundational for the divine concept of mercy, a few other texts follow this mercy-of-revelation pattern. In Zech 12:10, God promises to endow his people with a “spirit of grace and compassion (πνεῦμα χάριτος καὶ οἰκτίρμοι)” so that they might truly see and mourn for the one they have pierced. In this text, the Lord mercifully reveals his true self-giving nature to his people who, then, absorb this divine mercy and have care for

4. See Sanday and Headlam, Romans, 352; E. Käsemann, Commentary on Romans (trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 168; see also Cranfield, Romans, 2:596.

5. Thus, Elizabeth Achtemeier’s definition of “mercy” in the OT: “Generally . . . it de-
notes the divine love, manifested in saving acts of grace, which God holds for his covenant people” (“Mercy,” IDB 3:352)
the one they have injured. And, again, in 3 Macc 5:51, a crowd of Jews on the brink of execution pray to the “Ruler over every power” to be merciful (οἰκτίρω) by making an appearance (μετὰ ἐπιφανείας).

God’s Forgiving Mercy

Perhaps the most central place where God’s mercy of forgiveness is highlighted is the Psalter, where Israel’s leaders have a common consciousness as a people who rely on the Lord, who does not treat them according to their sins. A classical example is David’s plea in Ps 51 (LXX Ps 50): “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy; and according to the multitude of your compassions (τὸ πλῆθος τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν) blot out my transgression” (LXX 50:1). A second key context for these appearances of the language of God’s merciful forgiveness is the penitential prayer texts of Ezra 9, Neh 9, and Dan 9. For example, Daniel hails, “To you, the Lord our God, belong mercies and atonements for sin (οἱ οἰκτιρμοὶ καὶ οἱ ἱλασμοί), even though we have turned against you” (9:9). Nowhere is this forgiving mercy more punctuated than in the closing verses of Micah: “Who is a God like you, removing our unrighteousness, and passing over the ungodly deeds of the remnant of his inheritance? . . . He will return and have mercy (οἰκτιρήσει) on us; he will sink our iniquities and all our sins will be thrown down into the depths of the sea” (7:18–20).

God’s Rescuing Mercy

In true matter of fact, most of the occurrences of οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω pertain to God’s mercy on his exiled people and involve the ongoing plea that he be faithful to his covenantal commitment to restore, protect, and redeem his people Israel, all the while redeeming his own name. Nehemiah recounts the mercies (οἰκτιρμός) of God whereby he heard his people’s cries for help and sent deliverers (σωτῆρας) to their aid. The sending of the pil-

6. The priestly leader, Eleazar, prayed on behalf of this people recounting the “shining of the light of mercy (φέγγος ἐπιφάνας ἐλέους)” on Israel in the exodus (4 Macc 6:4). He implores God, who is the all-merciful (πολυέλεε), to reveal himself (ἐπιφαίνω) to them in this time of distress and oppression (6:9). In a final plea, he boldly states: “Let it be shown to all the Gentiles that you are with us, O Lord” (6:15). Other texts that could be categorized under the rubric of God’s revelatory mercy include Pss 68:17–19 LXX, 78:8–10 LXX, 101:14 LXX; Sir 36:12–13; Mic 7:18–19; Isa 63:15.


8. Again, whereas only a few passages have been described here, a host of other texts easily fit within this category: 2 Sam 24:14; 1 Kgs 8:50; 1 Chr 21:13; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:31; 3 Macc 2:19–20; Pss 4:2 LXX, 24:7 LXX, 39:12 LXX, 59:3 LXX, 66:2 LXX, 102:4 LXX, 144:9 LXX; Hos 2:19–21; Isa 63:15; Bar 2:27.
lars of cloud and fire were demonstrations of God’s ongoing mercies of deliverance (9:19). However, most of the appearances of this “mercy of deliverance” pattern are not retrospective, but forward looking or, better yet, forward hoping.

Forgive your people who have sinned against you . . . and grant them mercy in the sight of their captors. (1 Kgs 8:50)

Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your manifold mercies (ἐπὶ τοὺς οἰκτιρμοὺς σου τοὺς πολλούς). (Dan 9:18)

Sometimes the tone is hopeful.

He who has brought us down will have mercy (οἰκτιρῆσει) according to his gracious pity. (Lam 3:32)

Other times, the Lord is reminded of his promise to be merciful and sometimes even challenged to prove it. In the desperate hope for divine rescue (ῥύομαι; Isa 63:16), God’s people pray,

Turn from heaven and look from your glorious and holy house. Where is your zeal and your strength; where is the abundance of your mercies and compassions (οἰκτιρμῶν) that you have kept from us? (Isa 63:15)

Beyond the text of the LXX, the questions of when and how (and sometimes if) God will show his merciful deliverance are repeated again and again (see especially Pss. Sol. 8:27, 9:8; Pr. Man. 2–7).9

THE COVENANTAL MERCIES OF PAUL’S FAITHFUL GOD

This engagement with the use of οἰκτιρμῶς/οἰκτίρω in the LXX helps us to see the relevance and potential importance of Paul’s recognition of the mercies of God demonstrated in the gospel and the powerful basis this supplies for the kind of imperative he delivers in Rom 12, if we can accept that he was influenced by his reading of Scripture and that the language of the LXX is representative of the kind of thought world in which Paul generally existed. Before turning directly to διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ in Rom 12:1, it is necessary to observe how the themes of the mercy of God surface in chs. 1–11, both explicitly and implicitly. The structure of the three kinds of mercy, as artificially separated as they may be, will aid in demonstrating the thought Paul has put into what these mercies are, how they are (re)defined and explicated by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and how life should be lived as a result of them. Two key texts are critical in this regard: Rom 9:14–16 and 3:21–26.

Romans 9:14–16

Romans 9–11 deals with the matter of God’s righteousness and his relationship with Israel. That the discussion can be framed in terms of whether God is faithfully committed to fulfilling his promise of showing mercy to his people is demonstrated by the explicit language of mercy in 9:15–23 (at the beginning of this section) and 11:30–32 (at the end).

In light of the failure of Israel to accept that the Messiah is Jesus, Paul addresses the problem of the perspicuity and reliability of God’s purpose and plan. As James Dunn observes, Paul struggles to hold together two convictions: “that the blessings of the gospel (to all) are the blessings of Israel; and yet they remain Israel’s blessings.”

In Rom 9:10–11, Paul reflects on God’s sovereign choosing and calling, which is irrespective of the deeds, good or bad, of the recipient. Though Israel benefited from this in the past as God clung to a stubborn and stiff-necked people and promised them love, restoration, and mercy, the question remains, “if . . . God has turned from Jews to Gentiles, does this not invalidate the scriptural doctrine of election, according to which God will remain the God of this people in perpetuity, no matter what?”

Can God be accurately accused of not upholding his covenantal faithfulness—his righteousness (cf. 9:14)? After emphatically denying such a claim, Paul turns directly to Exod 33:19: “For [God] says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion (οἰκτιρήσω) on whom I have compassion (οἰκτιρῶ)’” (Rom 9:15).

At first this may appear to be a response to the effect of “I am the sovereign Lord and I will do as I please.” However, first of all, this citation is not like the one in 9:13, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” Paul does not immediately defend, in Rom 9:15, God’s freedom to preserve some and discard others. The divine identity, as we observed earlier in our discussion on Exodus, is depicted in terms of pure mercy—mercy and compassion.

Second, Paul’s acknowledgement that God was speaking to Moses reveals that he probably had the context of this pentateuchal discourse in mind. In particular, this conversation between the Lord and Moses takes


12. J. D. G. Dunn, Beginning from Jerusalem (Christianity in the Making 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 910.


14. For the argument that ἀδικία in 9:14 should be framed in terms of covenantal infidelity, see Dunn, Romans, 2:551.

15. There is no doubt that Paul “zitiert Ex 33, 19c genau nach dem Text der LXX” (O. Kuss, Der Römerbrief übersetzt und erklärt [Regensburg: Pustet, 1957–78], 3:721).

place after the rebellious act of idolatry with the golden calf (Exod 32:1–35). It becomes clear, then, that God’s going with his people, his self-revelation as the God of mercy and compassion, is the fulfillment of a promise in spite of Israel’s failure. Many scholars have observed the relationship between Exod 33:19 and 3:14–15, where the God who is the “I am who I am,” on the surface a statement of independence and transcendence, proves himself to be, in the words of Brevard Childs, the “I am there, wherever it may be . . . I am really there!” In his use of Exod 33:19, considered to be “the most extensive divine self-revelation in the Pentateuch,” Paul is probably not simply stating that God should not be questioned for showing mercy arbitrarily. Rather, as Douglas Campbell aptly puts it, mercifulness and compassion are essential attributes of God’s “innermost nature.”

To some Jews, Christ would appear to be the problem—a crucified “messiah” that effectively brought an end to the cherished law (10:4). For Paul, though, Christ was the demonstration of God’s own righteousness and mercy, proof of his commitment to reveal himself, deliver his people, and forgive them once and for all.

In Rom 9:15, of the three kinds of forgiveness outlined earlier according to the Septuagintal usage of οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω, only the mercy of revelation is obvious, though the mercy of forgiveness is implicit. Nevertheless, there is one text that brings forward all three types of mercy and will serve as our second case study of God’s mercy in Romans: 3:21–26.

Romans 3:21–26

Scholars regularly argue that 3:21–26 is, essentially, an abstract of the message of the entire letter. Part of the proof of this claim is evidenced by the appearance of δικαιοσύνη or δικαιόω no fewer than seven times in these seven verses. But, if the “righteousness of God,” or his covenant

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Calf and Divine Mercy”) who writes, “Paul’s introduction of this quotation with the words ‘For he says to Moses’ indicates that he knows the dialogical context on Mount Sinai in which this statement appears; it is not just a free-floating ‘tag.’”


23. Rom 3:20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26 (S×).
faithfulness, is given direct attention here, it is also a portrayal of God’s divine mercy in Christ.

In the first place, Paul refers to the revelation of the “righteousness of God” (3:21). This revelation, as N. T. Wright observes, is not simply a transfer of information, the unveiling of the “truth.” Rather, “it means the unveiling of God through a historical event.” This divine revelation must involve, in part, the return of the glorious presence of God with his people. Keep in mind that when Jews such as Eleazar begged God to come down from his throne and rescue his people, they were appealing to the merciful nature of God (3 Macc 5:51). It is particularly in Christ, though, that God’s mercy is revealed, because he is the cause of their “redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις)” (3:24). This term, ἀπολύτρωσις, would almost certainly have evoked images of the deliverance of God’s people from Egypt, but on a larger scale: “a new exodus, the cosmic equivalent of what God did for Israel long ago.” The “Egypt” is defined later, in Rom 6–8, as Sin and Death, masters from whom God’s people have been newly liberated to turn and serve the true Lord in righteousness and holiness. The Christ event marks the fulfillment of God’s promise and merciful actions of bringing freedom by both eliminating the enemy and turning his people toward him and empowering them by the Spirit (Rom 8:4–6, 9).

Finally, in terms of the mercy of forgiveness, Paul refers to the righteousness of God which is found in his sacrifice of Christ in light of the passing over of sins formerly committed (3:25–26). It would seem that Paul regarded the sacrificial system as not fully satisfactory, as though it were, to borrow an analogy from James Dunn, “merely a ‘holding pattern’ with sentence suspended . . . till the coming of Christ, with Christ’s death the one and only properly effective sacrifice.” Dunn is probably correct that the sacrificial system, in Paul’s mind, was only a limited solution to the problem because it could not properly deal with the internal and infectious power of sin. Again, the forgiving God demonstrates through Christ his righteousness in a way that affirms the conviction of Daniel mentioned earlier: “To you, the Lord our God, belong mercies and atonements for sin

25. When Paul refers to the “glory of God” (Rom 3:23), Douglas Moo (Romans, 226) comments that what Jews and Gentiles lack is the “magnificent presence of the Lord”; similarly, Fitzmyer, Romans, 347.
28. Dunn, Romans, 1:173; Dunn, in fact, poses this as a question, but his answer is undoubtedly affirmative.
29. See ibid.; see also A. Schlatter, Romans: The Righteousness of God (trans. S. Schatzmann; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 100. R. Jewett (Romans, 290) argues that what Paul is referring to are the sins that were not covered by temple rites. However, there is no clear evidence for this position.
The ultimate demonstration of Daniel’s claim is found in God’s provision of the ἱλαστήριον of Christ (Rom 3:25).

We have seen, then, that all three characteristics of God’s mercy (as we have discovered in the LXX literary pattern of the use of οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω) can be found in Rom 3:21–26 where the God who demonstrates his righteousness is the God of revealing, redeeming, and forgiving mercy.

The Unfathomable Nature of God’s Mercy

A question might linger, for Paul’s first readers, regarding how God’s promises of mercy are worked out in his timing and choices. In Rom 9:14–16, it is a matter of why Israel is not presently experiencing the mercy of God. In Rom 3:21–26, Paul is addressing why God passed over Israel’s sins and chose only to act out of his mercy finally through Christ—providing the truly efficacious sacrifice for sin. One clue to this mystery of the ways of God’s mercies may be found in the context in which οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω is found in the LXX. In several instances of the use of this terminology, the Lord himself is responsible for punishing his own people. Often the word δίδωμι or παραδίδωμι is used to express the giving of affliction or the handing over to Israel’s enemies. Frequently, in these texts, mercy is somehow in mind—either God’s continuing presence in exile, the hope of future mercy, or the mercy of the captors themselves (by the Lord’s influence). Thus, Nehemiah praises God for his compassion on Israel in the exodus and his continued mercies in the wilderness (see 9:19). But, in Israel’s idolatrous rebellions, the Lord gave (δίδωμι) them over into the hands of their oppressors (9:27). In Isaiah, the Lord is exalted as the patient one who bestows mercy, and he is also the one who gives (δίδωμι) Israel the “bread of affliction” and the “scant water” (30:20). And, again, in 1 Kgs 8, the God who gives Israel mercy at the hands of its captors also gives them over (παραδίδωμι) to their enemies (8:46; cf. 2 Chr 30:7–9, Ps 105:41–46).

Paul seems to be aware of this tension between the ongoing mercy of the Lord and his “handing over” of his people to their enemies. Rom 1:18–32 bears striking similarities to this LXX pattern of judgment and “handing over” we have observed. The sins of the people under discussion lead God to give them over (παραδίδωμι) to impurity, passions, and a debased mind (cf. 1:24, 26, 28). Beverly Gaventa cogently argues that these actions and attitudes serve as examples of synecdoche in reference to the “anti-God powers,” namely Sin and Death. Certainly one might wonder at this

30. καὶ πάλιν μενεῖ ὁ θεὸς τὸ δικαίωμα ἀναθεματισμός (Isa 30:18).
31. This same verb (παραδίδωμι) is used for God’s handing over of his people in Ps 78:61 LXX, 106:41 LXX; Jer 21:10; Bar 4:6; Ezek 16:39.
32. Beverly Gaventa is right to observe that the common connections that scholars make between this text and Wis 13–14 overlook the key difference that, in the latter text, God is not designated as the actor who surrenders his people to their enemies; see Our Mother Saint Paul (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 114.
33. See ibid., 118–19.
conscious act of betrayal;34 how could God repeatedly deliver his people over into the hands of her enemies? This is a question of God’s mercy. Paul effectively demonstrates that Israel has become part of the problem, not the solution (see 3:1–4). But, nevertheless, God’s giving over of his sinful people is finally revealed to have a merciful purpose.35 N. T. Wright explains the redemptive end of this “handing over” of his people in this way; God was heaping sins via the law on Israel in order to lure Sin and Death.36 Part of the calling of Israel, then, as Wright explains, is to be the context where Sin is drawn to one place and dealt with by Israel’s representative, the “Messiah.”37 The kind of merciless judgment that God seemingly metes out to his people, what may appear as a betrayal, will actually prove to have a truly merciful end.

Beverly Gaventa, while reading the redemptive trajectory of Romans quite differently from Wright, still makes a strong connection between the early judgment language (esp. 1:18–32) and the imagery of mercy and freedom later in the text. Drawing from an apocalyptic perspective, she

34. Properly speaking, the fundamental meaning of παραδίδωμι in Rom 1:18–32 is a “handing over” with a view toward the judgment of God, but for the early Christians, the term would certainly have been colored by the betrayal of Jesus by Judas; see N. Perrin, “The Use of (Para)didōmai in Connection with the Passion of Jesus in the New Testament,” in A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 94–103. Paul clearly repeats the terminology of this imagery in 1 Cor 11:23. In Romans, given that this term appears six times, I find it hard to believe that a nuance of “betrayal” such as this would not be present, especially when two instances (4:25, 8:32) are specifically referring to Jesus; for a brief articulation of the importance of this connection, see R. B. Hays, “The Story of God’s Son: The Identity of Jesus in the Letters of Paul,” in Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage (ed. B. R. Gaventa and R. B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 180–99, at p. 190. Moreover, while the “handing over” language has judgment in view, drawing in the negative valence of “betrayal” brings to the surface questions that may have been swirling in the heads of the readers of Romans regarding the trustworthiness of Paul’s God, hence the centrality of Rom 9–11.

35. Cranfield (Romans, 1:121) explains it this way: “God allowed [these men] to go their own way, in order that they might at last learn from their consequent wretchedness to hate the futility of a life turned away from the truth of God”; and, again, “this delivering them up was a deliberate act of judgment and mercy on the part of the God who smites in order to heal (Isa 19:22), and that throughout the time of their God-forsakeness God is still concerned with them and dealing with them.”

36. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 231–57. In an attempt to explain how the gracious God can have “vessels of wrath,” on p. 239, Wright explains, The point is not that the creator decides, arbitrarily, to save some and condemn others. Rather, he sees that the only way of rescuing his world at all is to call a people, and to enter into a covenant with them, so that through them he will deal with evil. But the means of dealing with evil is to concentrate it into one place and condemn—execute—it there. The full force of this condemnation is not intended to fall on this people in general, but on their representative, the Messiah. But, insofar as they become the place where sin is thus initially focussed (5:20), Israel necessarily becomes the ‘vessel of wrath’. And insofar as Israel clings to her privileged status, and to the Torah as reinforcing it, refusing to recognize the crucified Messiah as the revelation of God’s covenant faithfulness, she is bound to remain in that condition.

37. See “Romans,” 634–35.
points to the intentional repetition of the term παραδίδωμι and especially its use in Rom 8:32, where the Father is shown to have given over his Son ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν πάντων—a final act of mercy that signals ultimate forgiveness and redemption. As Gaventa puts it, “the cross is the point at which the ‘handing over’ to the anti-God powers reaches its undoing.” This perspective brings clarity to the matter of God’s passing over of sins in Rom 3:25. For Paul, the Messiah’s death on a cross signified the climactic act of God by dealing with sin decisively and initiating a new age of restoration and life (cf. Rom 6:4). But what of the status of Israel? Paul offers an answer in Rom 11:32: the imprisoning of all has the wider purpose of the redemption of all. His mercy is not abandoned, but working itself out through the new stage of history enacted by the Christ event.

ROMANS 12:1–2: WHAT “MERCIES OF GOD”? 

We may finally return to Rom 12:1a—what mercies of God? We have observed that Paul could certainly be drawing from an LXX tradition of referring to the self-revelatory, forgiving, and freeing mercies of God. This is, as noted above, highlighted in Rom 1–8 and 9–11. Now we turn to Rom 12:1–2 to see how these concepts might establish a basis for the injunctions he gives, especially with a view toward the remaining subject matter in the letter.

From Peace to New Worship (The Mercy of Forgiveness)

It is true that Paul rarely uses specifically the language of forgiveness (ἀφίημι, ἀφεσις), because he rarely mentions the act of remitting sins. However, the concept of forgiveness is necessarily relational (and, in Paul’s context, God was not undoing the acts of some evil force, but undoing his own handing over.

38. What is said here actively—God gave up his son for others (all)—is already mentioned in the passive form in Rom 4:25: “[Christ] was handed over to death for our trespasses (Dİ picker διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν).” Scholars generally note the connection to Isa 53:6 LXX (cf. 53:12), “the Lord gave him up for our sins (κύριος παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν)” (see, e.g., Cranfield, Romans, 1:251; Dunn, Romans, 1:241). The MT offers a slightly different reading that means something more like “the Lord caused the sin of us all to attack (הפגיע) him.”

39. Gaventa, Saint Paul, 122. Again, it is important to recognize Gaventa’s wider point that God was not undoing the acts of some evil force, but undoing his own handing over.

40. Ibid., 122–23. That the final restoration of Israel is intended by God is explained by Wright (“Romans and the Theology of Paul,” Pauline Theology, vol. 3: Romans [ed. D. M. Hay and E. E. Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 30–67, quoting p. 57) in this way: “Israel was like a bomb disposal squad called to take the devastating device to a safe place to be detonated, and then to leave it there. If Israel clings to its status of privilege, refusing to give it up, it is like the members of a bomb squad who are so proud of their important mission that they become reluctant to leave the bomb behind.”

41. Thus, L. Keck (Romans [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005], 283) finds the nature of God’s mercy in Romans 11 as such: “God’s mercy is treated here not as a timeless attribute or as an undifferentiated disposition, but rather as a mode of activity that uses specific, historical forms of human disobedience to achieve God’s goal”; see also C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (BNTC; London: Black, 1991), 208.

42. See Rom 4:7; cf. Col 1:14, Eph 1:7.
covenantal) and includes the idea of reconciliation and peace with God—a subject that Paul regularly addresses. Karl Barth makes the connection between the new worship of Rom 12:1 and the prior initiative of the God who makes peace (cf. Rom 1:7). 43 Barth defines Paul’s understanding of peace as humans “being before God with their fellows and themselves according to the order of the divine grace of reconciliation.” 44 This nearness-to-God allows Christians to “put their persons (their bodies, σώματα) at God’s disposal as ‘a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom. 12:1).” 45 Barth also could have easily pointed to Rom 5:1–2, where God’s saving righteousness makes possible peace (εἰρήνη) with God through Christ. This peace of God is not just a static act of un-remembering sins but the offer of the privilege of access (προσαγωγή) into the enveloping sphere of divine favor and empowerment (5:2). 46

The term προσαγωγή, though rare in the NT, is probably meant to carry a cultic connotation, referring to “unhindered access to the sanctuary as God’s presence.” 47 The result of this right to access is, undoubtedly, the assurance of salvation from wrath (see 5:9). But, as Paul makes clear in Rom 12:1, it allows for this free way of approach to God, regardless of the level of purity (based on physical attributes such as gender or ethnicity) that one has, 48 in order to worship in a way that is pleasing to God (εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ). Dunn suggests that Paul may have had in mind the allaying of the kinds of situations and attitudes regarding sacrifice that the prophets regularly criticized, 49 so Hos 8:13, “Though they offer choice sacrifices, though they eat flesh, the LORD does not accept them. Now will he remember their iniquity, and punish their sins; they shall return to Egypt” (NRSV); and Amos 5:22, “Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon” (NRSV). 50 It was anticipated, though, that a time will come when God would fit his people for their role as his holy ones and offer legitimate sacrifices.

For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord God, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the

44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
47. E. Käsemann, Romans, 133; see also K. L. Schmidt, “ἀγωγή κτλ.,” TDNT 1:131; Wright, “Romans,” 516.
49. Dunn, Romans, 2:711.
50. In both of these verses, the Greek (LXX) word for “accept” is προσδέχομαι and not εὐάρεστος.
land; there I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your sacred things. As a pleasing odor I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations. (Ezek 20:40–41 NRSV)

This same sentiment appears to be found in Paul’s thought where, on the basis of God’s saving mercy, believers stand on the mountain of his grace and serve$^{51}$ him there with pleasing sacrifices. This work of God was not a simple pronouncement of forgiveness, but could be referred to as “costly mercy”—the procurement of peace at the price of Christ’s accepting the penalty of human transgressions (Rom 4:25).

The Reclaiming of the Body for God (The Mercy of Deliverance)

The fact that Paul calls for the offering of the believers’ bodies ($σώματα$) is too often generalized to mean “person.”$^{52}$ But all along in Romans, Paul has depicted the physical body as under the sway of Sin.$^{53}$ Beginning with ch. 1, Paul describes the degradation and corruption of the body in Rom 1:24. In 4:19, Paul discusses the power of God, the object of Abraham’s faith, which was able to overcome the weakness of his “good-as-dead” body ($τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σῶμα [ἡδη] νεκρώμενον$). In ch. 6, he refers to the “body of sin,” which is enslaved (6:6; cf. 6:12). The “I” of Rom 7, whoever he may be, hopes for deliverance from “this body of death” (7:24). Finally, in ch. 8, Paul brings his message of the dynamic gospel to bear on this somatic plight. Through Christ, new life has been given to the “mortal body” ($τὰ θνητὰ σώματα ὑμῶν$; 8:11) and the power of Sin over the body has been eradicated (8:13). It is on this basis that Paul can call for an offering of the body as a holy, living, and pleasing sacrifice to God. Through God’s bondage-breaking mercy, believers have been rescued from the yokes of Sin and Death and have been given new freedom to present their liberated bodies to their new lord.

As we have noted above, it is very likely that conceptually the exodus was a suggestive image for Paul as he reflected on the impact of the Christ event. In Rom 12:1, the pattern appears to be repeated in that Paul reflects on the Israelites’ freedom from slavery and that they were called to leave Egypt and, going out into the wilderness, serve the true God. The verb used

51. Ezek 20:40–41 LXX has this verb as δουλεύω, and it is worth noting the significance of this concept of new lordship and enslavement to God in Romans where this same verb is used in 12:1: τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες (cf. Rom 6:6, 16:18).

52. For a sustained argument against the meaning “person” of σῶμα and the defense that it refers (in most instances) to the physical body, see R. Gundry, SŌMA in Biblical Theology with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology (SNTSMS 29; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

53. This should not mean that Paul viewed the body as evil in and of itself but rather that it stands as the arena of conflict in this present evil age and is “under hostile occupation”; see F. F. Bruce, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 147.
in Exodus for this service is λατρεύω, a close cognate of λατρεία (found in Rom 12:1—“worship”).

He [God] said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship (λατρεύσετε) God on this mountain.” (Exod 3:12) 54

This true worship, which God had commanded of Israel did not materialize as was hoped. Only as a result of God’s mercies in sending the Messiah was the lingering slave-master, Sin, ultimately dealt with.55 Thus, the new people of God in Christ are called to treat their bodies not as the object of worship (see Rom 16:18) 56 but as the organ of worship, the means by which believers demonstrate their dedication to God.57

The Transformative Disclosure of God in Christ
(The Mercy of Divine Self-Revelation)

Scholars have wondered how Rom 12:1 relates to 12:2. Jewett is correct that the first verse deals with “somatic relations,” while the second “concentrates on mental outlook.” 58 Paul warns believers (1) to resist the pressures of squeezing into the mold of this age, choosing instead (2) to seek out transformation of the mind that does the will of God. By his use of two words in this second verse that deal with shape (συσχηματίζω) and form (μεταμορφόω), Paul is divulging his belief that humans are, by nature, “imaging” beings.59 They are always mutating into the form and image of some subject or object. Though Paul clearly sets out the negative model, “this age” (τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ), he does not explicate the positive one. To what (or whom) should the believer be “reshaped”? We may take a hint here from Paul’s use of εἰκών in Romans and elsewhere. In 1:23, the downward spiral of human debasement began with idolatry—the trading off of the glory of God for idols (εἰκών) made to look like creatures. However, one of the sins of Israel’s past was that it sought out human solutions to their

54. This command is referred to repeatedly throughout Exodus (4:23; 7:16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7, 8; 10:11, 24, 26; finally, the plea is accepted by Pharaoh in 12:31).
56. See K. Sandes’ excellent study, Belly and Body in the Pauline Letters (SNTSMS 120; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
57. Thus, B. Byrne (Romans [SP; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996], 363) writes, “Faith, which for Paul is always faith in God as Creator [looking back to Rom 1:18 and 4:17b], finds expression in a bodily obedience that is the ‘rational worship’ owed by human being to God.”
58. Jewett, Romans, 731.
59. This is an essential argument of G. K. Beale’s insightful study on idolatry, We Become What We Worship (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 16: “At the core of our beings we are imaging creatures. It is not possible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in creation.”
problems precisely because they wanted what is tangible and visible.\textsuperscript{60} The link between desiring a physical king (over having the Lord be their only magnate) and the worship of idols is made by Hosea:

They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction. (8:4)

They were conforming to the wrong image over and over again.\textsuperscript{61} It is, of course, an act of God’s mercy that he chose to depict his own image in his Son—Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians, Paul proclaims Christ as the “image of God,” the depiction of his glory (4:4).\textsuperscript{62} It is, thus, human destiny, at the juncture of the ages, to reverse the process of being counterfeit copies. Rather,

all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

Likewise, in Rom 8:29, Paul makes it clear that God designed his new-age blueprint in such a way that those who believe in his Messiah would “conform to the image of his Son (συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνος τοῦ υἱοῦ ἑαυτοῦ).” Redeemed humanity can look upon the Son who is “an exact representation (Ebenbild) as well as a visible expression of God,” as Murray Harris has put it.\textsuperscript{63} This offering of a concrete “face of God”\textsuperscript{64} is a divine act of mercy in his own self-revelation.

Note the similar language in Rom 12:2 and 8:29: believers are meant to resist the forward movement of Sin’s push and, instead, “be transformed (μεταμορφοῦσθε)” by the renewal (i.e., the “rebooting”) of the mind; though not specified here, Paul is clear that, as a result of God’s mercy, he has sent an appropriate object to which mortals should conform (συμμόρφους)—Christ, the Son of God.

\textsuperscript{60} E.g., the desire for a king “just like the others nations” (1 Sam 8:5–6) and the judgment of this sin in Hos 13:10–11.

\textsuperscript{61} See the curse of Ps 115:8: “Those who make them are like them.”

\textsuperscript{62} It is difficult to express the cultural nuance of εἰκών because it is used of “images” (in general) but also “idols” (see, e.g., Deut 4:16 LXX; Isa 40:19–20). Paul could exploit this connection to further honor Christ and denigrate idol worship. Larry Hurtado (“Paul’s Christology,” in The Cambridge Companion to Paul [ed. J. D. G. Dunn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 185–98, at p. 192) explains, “The meaning of this idea of Christ as God’s ‘image’ (εἰκόν) in whom God’s glory is reflected seems to be drawn from ancient notions of the function and significance of the images of gods that were characteristically the visible objects to (and through) which one revered the gods. The effect is to describe Christ in amazingly exalted terms.”

\textsuperscript{63} M. J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 331.

\textsuperscript{64} For this language of the “face of God” in the image of Christ, see Jerome: “What is the face of God like? As his image certainly, for as the apostle says, the image of the Father is the Son”; Homily 6 on Psalm 66 (67), as cited in 1–2 Corinthians (ed. G. Bray; ACCNT; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 229.
CONCLUSION

As we can see, there is clear evidence of a movement from the defining of God’s mercies (in Rom 1–8 and 9–11) to their serving as a basis and means of living and worshiping by faith. It has been a particularly useful exercise to explore how οἰκτιρμός/οἰκτίρω is used in the LXX, how the mercies and compassion of God are often recognized, appealed to, hoped for in the future, and renewed every day. We have detected a particular thematic and rhetorical use of these Greek terms where Israel’s Lord is demonstrated as the one who offers the mercies of revelation, deliverance, and forgiveness. His revelation culminates, through Christ, in the apocalyptic enabling of sharing in God’s divine life and conforming to the image of his Son (8:29), who was “given over” by the Father. His merciful act of deliverance through Christ offers the power to be free from the gravitational pull of Sin and Death and to redirect oneself to God (6:11). By his divine mercy through Christ, he has established forgiveness and atonement once and for all so that a way of approach in worship and sacrifice to God, unmediated, has been secured (Rom 5:1–2). These mercies, though Paul almost certainly did not have three separate categories in mind, form the foundation for a new sacrifice of the self—free, at peace with God, empowered.

66. Indeed, I happily endorse Mark Reasoner (“The Theology of Romans 12:1–15:13,” in Pauline Theology, vol. 3: Romans [ed. D. M. Hay and E. E. Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 287–300, at pp. 294–95) in his reflection on the “mercies” of 12:1 referring to the “benefits of Christ” such as freedom from death (ch. 5), freedom from sin (ch. 6), freedom from the law (ch. 7), life with God through the Spirit (ch. 8), and “God’s covenantal faithfulness that is examined and re-affirmed in Romans 9–11.” The purpose of this article has been, though, to focus our eyes on how Paul would have understood God’s mercy, based on Scripture and the history of Israel’s sojourning, and how that influences his argumentation and the basis for his injunctions in Rom 12:1–2.