

# The motive of forgiveness in the Gospel according to Matthew

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This article explores the importance of the motif of forgiveness in the Gospel according to Matthew. It takes the arrangement (τάξις) of Matthew as an ancient biography (βίος) of Jesus as its point of departure for describing its ethics of forgiveness. The importance of the motif of forgiveness for Matthew is apparent from the relative frequency with which it is addressed in his Gospel and from the manner in which it is interwoven with his narration of the birth, ministry and death of Jesus. Thereafter the social-historical setting of the Gospel's initial readers is briefly described in terms of the external (a growing schism with formative Judaism) and internal challenges (intrapersonal conflict) they faced in an attempt to understand the reason for the prominence of the motif of forgiveness in it. Finally, Matthew's view of forgiveness is systematised by describing the different agents (God, Jesus and the disciples) of forgiveness in his Gospel. The article argues that the birth, life and death of Jesus as well as his words and deeds are integrated in a clear and compelling manner into Matthew's ethics of forgiveness. For Matthew the confession that God had forgiven his people through Jesus, is the main reason why they are compelled to forgive others.

**Die motief van vergifnis in die Evangelie volgens Matteus.** Die artikel ondersoek die tema van vergifnis in die Evangelie volgens Matteus. Dit neem die opbou (τάξις) van Matteus as 'n antieke biografie (βίος) van Jesus as vertrekpunt vir die beskrywing van die etiek van vergifnis daarvan. Vir Matteus blyk die belangrikheid van vergifnis uit die relatiewe frekwensie waarmee dit voorkom in die Matteusevangelie en die wyse waarop dit met sy vertelling van die geboorte, bediening en dood van Jesus verweef is. Die sosio-historiese agtergrond van die Matteusevangelie se aanvanklike lesers word ook kortliks beskryf in terme van die eksterne ('n groeiende skisma met formatiewe Judaïsme) en interne uitdagings (intrapersoonlike konflik) wat hulle in die gesig gestaar het in 'n poging om die rede vir die prominensie van die vergifnistema in Matteus te bepaal. Ten slotte word Matteus se siening van vergifnis gesistematiseer deur die beskrywing van die verskillende agente (God, Jesus en die dissipels) van vergifnis in sy Evangelie. Die artikel argumenteer dat die geboorte, lewe en dood van Jesus, sowel as sy woorde en daede op 'n duidelike en oortuigende wyse in Matteus se etiek van vergifnis geïntegreer is. Vir Matteus is God se vergifnis van sy volk se sondes deur Jesus, die primêre rede waarom hulle genoodsaak is tot die vergifnis van ander se oortredings teen hulle.

## Introduction

This article explores the motif of forgiveness in the Gospel according to Matthew. It is not a word study of the Greek verb ἀφίημι, nor of the forgiveness of sins as an aspect of the mission of the historical Jesus like the recent study of Hägerland (2012). Its focus is rather specifically on Matthew's understanding of the motif of forgiveness as it is expressed in his Gospel. The term *motif* is understood as a theological theme or idea that permeates a specific author's work (McKnight 1988:109). Whilst the importance of the forgiveness motif in Matthew has been noted by scholars like Reimer (1996:268–271), Luz (2001:28–29), Carter (2004:84) and Deines (2008:71), it is seldom discussed in a systematic manner. The study of Mbabazi (2011), which does study forgiveness in Matthew, specifically focusses on interpersonal forgiveness and therefore does not address the related motif of the forgiveness of sins at length.

Since the first Gospel is not a systematic theological tractate on forgiveness, but rather an ancient biography (βίος) of Jesus, this article will firstly take the genre and arrangement (τάξις) of Matthew into consideration by describing how it incorporates the motif of forgiveness into its narration of the story of Jesus. This is important, since some scholars (e.g. David Seeley 1994) have argued that Matthew does not present a coherent understanding of the motif of forgiveness, but rather a number of different, and even contradictory, perspectives thereof. It is thus important

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to determine if Matthew has satisfactorily integrated the different perspectives on Jesus' life and teaching with regards to forgiveness in his βίος.

References to Matthew's redaction of the Gospel of Mark will be made where appropriate, but the question of how he utilised his other sources will not be specifically addressed in this article, since it necessitates a study in itself.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that of the Matthean passages that has some bearing on the motif of forgiveness (Mt 1:21; 3:1–12; 5:3–12, 21–26, 38–42, 43–48; 6:12, 14–15; 7:1–5; 9:1–8; 12:32; 18:23–35 and 26:28),<sup>2</sup> only five (3:1–12; 9:1–8; 12:32; 20:28 and 26:28) occur in Mark. It thus appears as if Matthew has a particular interest in the motif of forgiveness even if it is not the dominant motif of his Gospel. The social-historical setting of Matthew will therefore briefly be taken into consideration in order to ascertain the possible reasons for the importance of the motif of forgiveness for its initial readers.

Finally, a systemisation of Matthew's understanding of forgiveness will be given by describing the words and deeds of different agents that relate to forgiveness in his Gospel.

## Forgiveness in Matthew's βίος of Jesus

David Seeley (1994) has argued in his post-modern deconstruction of the New Testament that Matthew has included a number of perspectives on the motif of forgiveness in his Gospel, which are not fully integrated with each other. The first perspective Seeley (1994:24) identifies is linked to the ethical teaching of Jesus and implies that forgiveness could be obtained by simply remaining faithful to his commandments. The second perspective focusses on God the Father who forgives sins with no reference to the death of Jesus (6:12, 14–15). This perspective is the opposite of the third in which forgiveness is explicitly linked to the death of Jesus (20:28; 26:28). The fourth perspective gives the temple and faithfulness to the Torah a continuing role in granting forgiveness for sins (8:4; 5:23–24). The presence of these different perspectives could attest to a Matthean community that was comprised of various groups adhering to different understandings of how forgiveness of sins could be obtained (e.g. a Jewish group still adhering to the Torah, and a Gentile group who's understanding of forgiveness centred in the death of Jesus). Also, Matthew himself was attempting to reconcile these two perspectives theologically with one another. According to Seeley (1994:48–52), who rejects the hierarchal imposition of one perspective over another, Matthew refrains from saying which of these soteriological

patterns is foundational and that the multiplicity of voices embedded within it should therefore not be silenced even though they form an inharmonious choir.

In order to ascertain whether Matthew has an integrated ethic of forgiveness, it is important to acknowledge its genre. It has been argued by Aune (1987:27–29, 43–46), Kea (1994:574–586) and Burrige (1997) that Matthew can be described as a Greco-Roman βίος of Jesus. From this perspective Matthew can be read as a biographical narration of the words and deeds of Jesus (Burrige 2007:188). It is therefore important to focus on passages that refer to the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness (e.g. 6:12, 14–15; 18:23–35) and those relating his deeds of forgiveness (e.g. 9:1–8) as well as to where they are placed within the τάξις of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Matthew broadly follows the threefold τάξις of an ancient Greek βίος. It begins with a prologue (προοίμιον) that gives an overview of the genealogy, birth and beginning of Jesus' ministry, which is followed by a long narration (διήγησις) of the major events in his ministry and an epilogue (ἐπιλογος) that describes his honourable death (Burrige 1997:514).<sup>4</sup>

## Forgiveness in the προοίμιον of Matthew (1:1–2:23)

In the prologue (1:1–2:23), which introduces a number of key themes in Matthew, Jesus is explicitly identified as the saviour of his people (1:21–23). The etymological explanation of the name of Jesus (τέξεται δὲ υἱόν, καὶ καλέσει τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν· αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν; 1:21) that Matthew gives before his birth, explicitly links the following narration of his life to his role in the salvation of Israel. Every mention of Jesus' name in the διήγησις therefore reminds the reader of his mission to save his people from their sins.

The prologue itself is linked to the epilogue (26:1–28:20) by an inclusio formed by the announcement that God would be present in the ministry of Jesus (1:23), which echoes the promise of the resurrected Jesus of his continuing presence in the church (28:20). This inclusio provides a frame for the interpretation of Matthew's extended διήγησις (3:1–25:46) of Jesus' words and deeds. In the prologue, the identification of Jesus as the saviour of his people (1:21) also foreshadows the declaration by Jesus (26:28) that he would save his people from their sins by giving his life as an offering. The literary frame provided by the prologue and epilogue of Matthew thus clearly emphasises that forgiveness is an important motif in its διήγησις (Nolland 2005:380).

1. Malina and Neyrey (1988:5–6) argue that the sources of Matthew (Q, M and Mk) did not have the same view of sin and forgiveness as Matthew himself (cf. 18:15–17 vs. 18:21–32). Matthew has, for example, a more inclusive and less perfectionist attitude than the constructed Q material. In the final version of the first Gospel, which, according to them, had undergone a process of revision, the Matthean Jesus is also depicted as breaking with the restrictive Jewish traditions regarding clean and unclean by eating with sinners and others who were considered unclean, since he preferred mercy over sacrifices and accepted everyone as his followers. This ongoing redaction of the Matthean tradition reflects the growing schism between the Matthean community and 1st century Judaism.

2. Further references to the Gospel of Matthew will be indicated only by chapters and verses.

3. Mbabazi (2011:68–70) makes a similar argument for the importance of the theme of interpersonal forgiveness on the basis of the strategic positioning of the relevant texts in Matthew. His structure of Matthew is, however, not entirely the same as the one outlined in this article. His focus is also restricted to interpersonal forgiveness.

4. Shuler (1987:72) notes that Matthew's τάξις matches that of ancient *encomia*, which entail four parts that respectively described the origin and birth of the subject, his nature and education, works and life, and, finally, his honourable death. If it is taken into account that *encomia* often omitted the second part (Neyrey 1998:103), its τάξις is very similar to that of the Gospel of Matthew. It is, however, unclear whether the *encomium* [a rhetorical category of speeches] also had biographical parallels.

## Forgiveness in the διήγησις of Matthew (3:1–25:46)

The content and structure of the Gospel of Matthew differs from that of most Greco-Roman βίοι in the way it interweaves the teaching of Jesus that are grouped in five extended discourses with an extended narrative of his deeds (cf. 4:17–11:1; 11:2–13:52; 13:53–16:20; 16:21–19:2; 19:3–25:46). The literary convention was to either add the teaching of the protagonist at the end of a βίος, or to include it through a number of expanded χρεία (Kea 1994:578–579). The interrelatedness of Jesus' words and deeds indicates that understanding Matthew's ethics of forgiveness necessitates not only a focus on Jesus' explicit<sup>5</sup> teaching on forgiveness, but also on various narrated actions in which he enacted and exemplified forgiveness. Jesus' healing of the sick (9:6) is, for example, enactments of forgiveness, whilst his meals with sinners and other undesirables (9:9–13) exemplified it. The causal connection commonly made between sin and sickness in the 1st century Mediterranean world (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:71; Nolland 2005:380)<sup>6</sup> resulted in the association of the healing of illness with the forgiveness of sin. In 9:6 this assumed connection is explicitly stated.

Matthew 3:1–4:16 functions as the introduction to Matthew's διήγησις of Jesus' words and deeds. In the first part (3:1–12) of the διήγησις Jesus is identified by John the Baptist as the sole authoritative mediator of God's forgiveness. According to John, Jesus would not only take the place of contemporary Jewish mediators of forgiveness, but would also surpass his own ministry of repentance. The conflict between John and various Jewish mediators of forgiveness, which is already apparent in the introduction (3:7–12), anticipates the fierce conflict that would develop between them and Jesus in the rest of the Gospel.

In the first part of Matthew's διήγησις (4:17–11:1) the focus is on Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus teaches about God's forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount (5:3–7:27), effects it through healing (9:1–8) and exemplified it through table fellowship with sinners (9:11). Whereas the Pharisees used table fellowship in order to signal the exclusion of those they considered being sinners (e.g. tax collectors), Jesus uses it as a means of expressing their inclusion in God's kingdom. This is in line with the function of table fellowship as an important symbol of friendship and reconciliation in the 1st century Mediterranean world (Hagner 1993:238).

The announcement of Jesus as the one who would teach and heal (4:23), also forms an inclusio with the summary of his ministry (9:35). This inclusio connects the narration of Jesus' teaching (5:3–7:27) to that of his deeds (8:2–9:34), and thus

5. It is for this reason that Matthew's understanding of forgiveness cannot be ascertained by simply conducting a word study of his use of the noun ἄφεσις (which only occurs in 26:28) or its more frequently used cognate verb ἀφιημι (occurring in 6:12, 14, 15; 9:2, 5, 6; 12:31, 32; 18:21, 27, 35). The fact that the noun ἄφεσις does not mean 'forgiveness' in the LXX, whilst the verb ἀφιημι is frequently used with the meaning of 'forgive', may have contributed to Matthew's avoidance of the noun (Nolland 2005:1081–1082).

6. Early Jewish literature (e.g. *Ecclus* 38:15; 3 *Macc* 2:21–2; *Jub* 23:13–14) commonly regarded illness as a punishment for sin (Hägerland 2012:180).

indicates that, as with any honourable person in the ancient world, Jesus' actions were in agreement with his words.

The importance of forgiveness in the first part of Jesus' ministry is evident from references to it in key parts of the first major discourse in Matthew (the Sermon on the Mount) in which Jesus explains what the kingdom of heaven entails. This extended discourse addresses key themes in Matthew (Burridge 1997:524; Kennedy 1984:55, 61–61) and it is thus noteworthy that forgiveness and related themes, occur in its *exordium* (5:3–16) in 5:5, 7 and 9 and in each part of its *argumentatio* (5:21–26, 28–42, 43–48 in the first, 6:7–15 in the second and 7:1–5 in the third part). Forgiveness is therefore clearly an important aspect of the kingdom of heaven that the Matthean Jesus proclaimed. The inclusio, formed by the calling of the first disciples (4:17–22) and the sending out of the 12 (10:1–11:1), further indicates that, since their mission was a continuation of that of Jesus, their mission to heal the sick (10:1) encompassed the forgiveness of sin that had been an integrated part of Jesus' healing ministry (cf. 9:1–8).

In the second part of Matthew's διήγησις (11:2–13:52), the negative response of Israel to the ministry of Jesus, John and the disciples are narrated. In it the conflict between Jesus and the dominant Jewish mediators of God's forgiveness continue to escalate until it culminates in Jesus' statement about the unpardonable sin (12:22–37). The severity of this conflict makes it clear that on-going conflict, rather than reconciliation, should be expected between the followers of Jesus and the exponents of Judaism in the rest of Matthew' narrative.

In the third part of Matthew's διήγησις (13:53–16:20), varying responses to the ministry of Jesus' teachings and miracles are described. This is the only part of the διήγησις in which the theme of forgiveness is not explicitly addressed. Important related themes, such as Jesus' ministry through miracles and his rejection by Israel, are, however, addressed.

In the fourth part of the διήγησις Jesus prepares his disciples for his death (16:21–19:2). The beginning of the fourth part coincides with the second phase (16:21–28:20)<sup>7</sup> of Jesus' public ministry. The first phase of his public ministry (4:17–16:20), in which his authority to teach, heal and forgive are related to each other, is introduced by the same transitional phrase (Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο) that introduces the second phase (cf. 4:17 and 16:21). In the second phase of Jesus' public ministry it is his weakness, suffering and sacrifice that are connected to his ability to forgive. Jesus also gives his disciples guidelines on how to live as a community (18:1–19:2) by instructing them on the importance of addressing interpersonal conflict (18:15–20), practising unlimited forgiveness (18:21–22), and forgiving each other's transgressions as God had forgiven theirs (18:23–35). It is thus clear that the forgiveness of co-members of the Matthean community was an important ethical imperative for Matthew.

7. The occurrence of the transitional phrase Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο in 4:17 and 16:21 divides Jesus' ministry into two phases (France 1985:59–60). The first phase (4:17–16:20) deals with the authoritative ministry of Jesus, while the second phase (16:21–25:46) is largely influenced by the announcement of Jesus' suffering. The different phases in the ministry of Jesus according to Matthew should not be confused with the different parts into which his narrative can be divided.



The fifth part (19:3–25:46) of the διήγησις describes Jesus' ministry in Judea. On his way to Jerusalem Jesus reveals to his disciples that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many (καὶ δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν; 20:28b). Together with three previous announcements of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus (16:21; 17:22–23; 20:18–19), in parts four and five of the διήγησις, Matthew makes it clear that in the climax of his Gospel, Jesus would die in order to effect forgiveness for his people's sins.

### Forgiveness in the ἐπίλογος (26:1–28:20)

In the epilogue (26:1–28:20), the longest continuous narrative in Matthew's βίος, the announcement in the prologue that Jesus would save his people from their sins (1:21), is finally accomplished through the death of Jesus on the cross (26:28; 27:45–54). The death of Jesus on the cross invokes the world of Old Testament sacrifices through which God made provision for the forgiveness of sins by means of offering a sacrifice. Even though the death of Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice has priority for Matthew as to how forgiveness for the sins of his people was finally secured, it does not negate the importance of his teaching on the necessity of practising forgiveness. Just as the making of a sacrifice did not give the one offering it the freedom to disregard God's will, but rather restored their relationship with God so that they could live according to his will, the sacrifice of Jesus did not invalidate his stringent demands for discipleship. His death is rather described as the supreme example of the obedience to God (20:25–28) to which all his disciples had been called (Nolland 2005:1083).

Whilst the crucifixion is unmistakably the climax of Matthew's narrative, it is thus not a negation of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, since he explicitly instructs his remaining disciples to continue teaching others after his resurrection all that he had command them to do (διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν; 28:20a). The epilogue also underlines once again the authority (ἐξουσία) of the Son of Man (cf. 9:6), which is the source of the church's authority (28:18). Since his authority as the Son of Man had enabled Jesus to forgive sins on earth, Matthew therefore implies that the church has the same authority to forgive the sins of others (Luz 2001:28).

### Summary

Whereas Seeley (1994:24) argues that Matthew did not intend to present a unified theology of forgiveness, but rather several different and incompatible perspectives on how forgiveness can be obtained from God, it is clear from the deliberate manner in which forgiveness is integrated into the τάξις of his Gospel that this not the case. The inclusio formed between the pro- and epilogue's references to the forgiveness of sins (1:21 and 26:28), frames the διήγησις of Matthew and thus connects the birth and death of Jesus to the narration of his ministry of forgiveness. The agreement between Jesus' teaching (5:3–7:27) and his deeds (8:2–9:34) in the διήγησις, and its framing by the προοίμιον and ἐπίλογος, emphasise that,

as with any honourable person in the ancient world, Jesus' actions were in agreement with his words and in alignment with both his birth and death.

The importance of the motif of forgiveness for Matthew is apparent from the relative frequency (cf. 1:18–25; 5:21–26; 6:7–15; 9:1–8; 12:22–37; 18:21–35; 26:26–30) with which it is addressed in his Gospel and from the manner in which it is interwoven with his narration of Jesus' birth, ministry and death. The importance of forgiveness for Matthew leads to the question as to why he expanded Mark's teaching on forgiveness in his Gospel. The following section will attempt to briefly answer the question as to the role the Matthean community's socio-historical setting could have played in necessitating his extensive treatment of forgiveness.

## The socio-historical setting of the Gospel of Matthew

The importance of the motif of forgiveness in Matthew's Gospel can be attributed to its possible socio-historical setting. The destruction of the temple in 70 AD (*J.W.* 6.1.1–7.1.1), Israel's centre for forgiveness with God, had a profound impact on the relationship between Jews across the ancient Mediterranean that necessitated a reinterpretation of their common religious tradition, which determined their interaction with each other and their God. There was also a growing tension between those Jews that accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and those who did not. Like a number of Christian communities that consisted of a growing number of Gentiles, the Matthean community was also apparently experiencing increasing internal conflict. It is in this context of external conflict and internal strife that Matthew wrote his βίος of Jesus.

### Conflict with Judaism

An important aspect of Matthew's understanding of the motif of forgiveness is that he apparently did not envision forgiveness and eventual reconciliation as possible or even desirable for all relationships. In this regard the fierce conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, and that of Matthew's initial readers and formative Judaism, does not appear to present the possibility of reconciliation between them.

The manner in which Matthew narrates the change in Jesus' teaching on the need for sacrifices (cf. 5:24, 8:1–4, 9:13), the relevance of the temple (cf. 12:6; 21:12–17; 26:61; 27:40) and the shift in the focus on Jesus' mission from Israel to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5; 15:24; 28:19), testify to a community that was separating from its Jewish roots (Luomanen 1998:263–264).<sup>8</sup>

8. For the Matthean community the deepening division between Jesus and the leadership of Israel that had resulted in him, making a clear distinction between the insiders who followed him (his new fictive kin) and those who had rejected him during his lifetime (cf. 12:46–50), reflected their own conflict with 1st century Judaism. This conflict was probably not limited to a specific geographical area, since the Matthean community could have been comprised of a number of small groups meeting in different locales where they were experiencing similar challenges (i.e. conflict with 1st century Judaism and a growing influx of Gentiles; see Ulrich 2007:76–77). Whilst it would thus be more appropriate to refer to the Matthean communities (plural), this article will follow the convention of referring to the Matthean community (singular) in order to refer to all of Matthew's intended readers.

In this process of separation it would have been, contra to the claim of Menninger (1994:30–31, 44–45), impossible for Matthew's community to seek reconciliation with other groupings within formative Judaism, as the schism between them was characterised by, amongst other differences, a deep conflict over important aspects of how forgiveness with God should be obtained.

The precise difference between Matthew's ethic of forgiveness and that articulated in the Old Testament is a debatable subject. Whilst some scholars claim that Matthew presents essentially the same understanding of forgiveness as the Old Testament, others have argued for a clear difference between them (Mbabazi 2011:21–24). One example of this being the virtual absence of interpersonal forgiveness in the Old Testament (Reimer 1996:271–272).

Even though Reimer (1996) has shown that the gap between the two Testaments can be bridged by an appeal to inter-testamental Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (e.g. Sirach 28:1–4), important differences between Matthean perspectives on the forgiveness of sins and his Jewish contemporaries remain. Examples of this are: firstly, being saved by remaining in God's original covenant with Israel versus being part of his new covenant (26:28); secondly, forgiveness obtained through sacrifice or by Jesus' atoning death (20:28; 26:28); thirdly, forgiveness mediated not by the Jewish brokers<sup>9</sup> (the temple, priests, Pharisees, etc.), but by Jesus and the members of the Matthean community (6:12, 14–15; 18:23–35); fourthly, forgiveness received, not by retribution or penance, but through the unconditional acceptance and grace of Jesus (9:1–8); and fifthly, the proclamation of the moral and spiritual salvation of Israel instead of their expected political and national liberation (Wright 1992:268–279). It is thus not only the absence of a common ethic of interpersonal forgiveness that would have complicated the reconciliation between the Matthean community and formative Judaism. It is also because the conflict between the two parties was, amongst other issues, on how forgiveness itself should be understood and obtained that the debate between them did not lead to reconciliation, but rather to the escalation of their conflict.

### Internal conflict

The Gospel according to Matthew also reflects the concerns of a community experiencing internal conflict. The precise reason for this conflict is, however, unclear. It may be related to Matthew's depiction of his community as being a *corpus mixtum* comprised of believers and non-believers (13:24–30, 36–43 and 47–50). What is clear is that, contrary to the abovementioned relationship with formative Judaism, Matthew emphasises the necessity of forgiveness within his community.

9. Within patron-client relations, a broker is a person who can put prospective clients in touch with patrons who control first-order resources such as land, jobs, goods, funds, power and information. Brokers thus control strategic contact with patrons (second order resources). Whilst the God of Israel can be described as Patron, those who facilitated access to him for his healing and forgiveness (e.g. priests) can be described as brokers. Within this scheme, Jesus, with his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, occupies the position of broker of the Kingdom, offering second-order resources of strategic contact with God as Patron, the heavenly Father (Malina 1996:149–157).

The internal conflict reflected in Matthew appears to be between individuals and not between different groupings or parties in his community (cf. 5:22–26; 18:15–20). In addressing this intrapersonal conflict, Matthew emphasises that each community member has the obligation to seek reconciliation with those who had transgressed against them (18:15–20). Even though he does envision a specific role for leaders like Peter in the decision making processes of his community (16:17–19), it is not only they, but all members that have the responsibility to address conflict and facilitate reconciliation.

It is evident that in addressing the conflict between members of the Matthean community, a balance had to be sought between the demand for unlimited forgiveness (18:21–22), and the expectation of appropriate conduct from those who had been forgiven (6:12, 14–15; 18:21–35). The failure to accept the admonishment of fellow believers would, for example, result in the unrepentant member being expelled from the community (18:15–20). Peter's question in 18:21 (κύριε, ποσάκις ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἐπτάκις) could reflect a conventional understanding of a reasonable limit to forgiveness (France 2007:704). Jesus, however, answered with a hyperbolic expression (οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἐπτάκις ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἐπτὰ), which implied that there should be no limits to forgiveness (18:21–22). Paradoxically, however, there would be no boundless forgiveness from God for those who were not prepared to forgive (18:22, 35; Nolland 2005:755, 1083). Matthew thus emphasises that members of his community could jeopardise their inclusion by not living according to the ethics of forgiveness that Jesus had taught them.

## The agents of forgiveness in Matthew

From the previous two sections it is apparent that Matthew considered forgiveness to be an important motif for his community with reference to the internal and external challenges it faced and that he therefore integrated his understanding of Jesus' teaching and ministry of forgiveness into his βίος of Jesus. In this section the different agents of forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew – God, Jesus and the disciples – will be discussed. Whilst the previous sections have plotted and contextualised Matthew's ethic of forgiveness, this section will attempt to systematise it.

### The forgiveness of others as imitation of God the Father

In Matthew the primary motivation for the forgiveness of others is not their contrition, but rather the command of God that his children should forgive others as he had forgiven them (cf. 6:12, 14–15; 18:23–35). They are thus to imitate him as their heavenly Father.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that for Matthew, God does not only provide an example for believers to imitate, but that his forgiveness of their sin is also conditional on their forgiveness of others. In some instances

10. Allison (2010:320–323, 355–356) traces Matthew's emphasis on Jesus' radical *imitatio Dei* commands to his interpretation of Q.

the forgiveness of others is a prerequisite for receiving his forgiveness (e.g. 6:14–15), whilst in others it is the appropriate response to his forgiveness of believers' transgressions (Mohrlang 1984:52–53; Schrage 1988:145).<sup>11</sup>

In the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer (6:12), two clauses are joined to one another by the conjunction *ὡς* to form a simile, which links the forgiveness of believers by God to their prior willingness to forgive others (Kennedy 1984:58). The hypotactic conjunction *ὡς* indicates that the petition in the main clause (6:12a) is qualified by the condition or rationale contained in the subordinate clause (6:12b). Grammatically the conjunction *ὡς* can indicate a subordinate clause of comparison ('like'), reason or cause ('because' or 'since'). The fifth petition for forgiveness from God is thus either qualified by the extent to which believers forgive others ('like'), or by the fact that they forgave others or not ('because'). Stander (1987:241) argues that the subordinate clause should be understood as one of reason or cause, since it does not state that believers are only forgiven to the extent that they forgive others (i.e. 'like they forgive others'). If this was the case, no-one would receive forgiveness, as the debt owed to God is much greater than the debt believers owe each other. The disciples are rather instructed to pray that God would forgive their sins, because they had forgiven those who have sinned against them. Doing the impossible (the atonement for their sins against God) is thus replaced with the requirement for doing what is possible (honouring God by emulating him in forgiving others).

In Matthew's unique parable<sup>12</sup> of the 'Unforgiving Debtor' (18:23–35), in which a slave is condemned for not forgiving his fellow slave's debt after he had been forgiven his by the king, the importance of emulating God's example is emphasised. According to Matthew, believers are under the obligation to forgive others, since they have experienced God's grace (Davies & Allison 1997:802). The parable of the 'Unforgiving Debtor' thus does not give a soteriological basis for forgiveness, but rather reflects on its effects (France 2007:704). Since they had experienced God's grace, the followers of Jesus were compelled to extend grace to all – even to their enemies.

It is clear from the above-mentioned that it is not the fixed order of God and believers actions in relation to each other that is important to Matthew, but rather their connection to each other.<sup>13</sup> This connection between God's response and the conduct of believers is an important aspect of Matthew's ethics that is not limited to his understanding of

forgiveness (cf. 5:7; 7:1–5, 12; 10:32–33 and 23:12; Davies & Allison 1988:611). An understanding of being accountable to God should, according to Matthew, elicit acts of mercy and forgiveness (cf. 5:7; 6:12, 14–15; 7:1–2; 18:33), since it is not only God's mercy that is linked to forgiveness, but also his judgement (Mbabazi 2011:45, 49–50).<sup>14</sup>

Whilst forgiveness is an important theme in Matthew's βίος of Jesus, it could be argued that Matthew has more references to the judgement of God than to his forgiveness (Buckley 1991:30). As is the case with forgiveness, the judgement by God is tied to the conduct of believers, since Jesus warns that he will judge people as they had judged others (7:1–5). From this perspective the ultimate goal of forgiveness is primarily the preservation of the forgiver's relationship with his or her heavenly Father, and secondarily, the restoration of their relation with those who had offended them (Mbabazi 2011:51).

### Jesus as mediator of God's forgiveness

In Matthew Jesus is depicted as the only true mediator of God's forgiveness (Neyrey 1998:56, 100), and it is this role, which defines his life and ministry. Already in the prologue of Matthew an angel had announced that he would save his people from their sin (cf. the use of the emphatic pronoun *αὐτός* in 1:21). He finally accomplished this salvation through his death on the cross in the epilogue (cf. 20:28; 26:28).

Jesus, however, also forgave people's sins before his death (9:1–8), and by this directly challenged the dominant mediators (the priests, scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees) of forgiveness within 1st century Judaism. Jesus gave a new interpretation of the Torah (cf. 5:17–48) and its provisions for what forgiveness was needed, which brought him into conflict with the Pharisees and scribes. He also criticised the temple and the prevailing purity laws (12:6), which put him on a collision course with the priests<sup>15</sup> and Sadducees.

Whilst 1st century Judaism had clear provisions for obtaining forgiveness via the offering of sacrifices in the temple, it was believed that God had reserved for himself the declaration of forgiveness in an ultimate sense on the Day of Judgement. Jesus, however, not only declared that God had forgiven the paralytic his sins (as a priest in the temple would),<sup>16</sup> or that he would do so in the future, but rather that he himself had already forgiven them (9:2). The scribes therefore understood Jesus as claiming to speak for God in an ultimate manner,

11. For a discussion on the matter: if the cognate nouns *ὀφείλημα* [debts or transgressions] and *ὀφειλέτης* [debtor or offender] in 6:12 refers to monetary debt or to moral transgressions, see Nel (2013:87–106).

12. Reimer (1996:277–279) has made a compelling case that Sir 28:1–4 might possibly be the basis for the parable (18:23–35).

13. Pokrifka-Joe (2001:165–166) has argued that human acts of forgiveness are both an expression of divine forgiveness already received and an essential condition for the continued and ultimate reception of divine forgiveness. Matthew, according to Pokrifka-Joe, does, however, not always describe all three elements, viz. God's gracious initiative, human's response to it and God's response to the latter. Whilst the parable in 18:23–35 contains all three elements, 6:12–15 only refers to the last two. It appears as from this pattern that the demand to respond to God's grace by showing mercy to others and by forgiving them, is stronger in Matthew than in any other New Testament writing (Mbabazi 2011:50).

14. The idea of accountability to God with regards to forgiveness and mercy is rare, but not totally absent (cf. Sir 28:1–4) in Judaism in the period before the writing of the New Testament (Mbabazi 2011:49).

15. According to Hägerland (2012:140–142) there is no indication that the priests considered forgiveness to be their exclusive right. The prophets, for example, were portrayed as bestowing, mediating or announcing God's forgiveness in the Old Testament (there is also evidence of a similar role for angelic mediation). The pronouncements made by John the Baptist also lend themselves far more easily to an anti-temple interpretation than those of Jesus.

16. The claim that priests would pronounce sins to be forgiven when atoning for the sins of others through a sin- or guilt-offering (cf. Lv 4:20–26) has been challenged as there is no reference to priestly pronouncements of forgiveness in early Jewish literature (Hägerland 2012:134–135). It is also debatable if the high priest had the authority to forgive sins.



hence their accusation that he was blaspheming (Nolland 2005:381). Jesus thus does not only act as a channel for God's forgiveness in Matthew, but also as the source of it (Davies & Allison 1991:91).

Matthew not only depicts Jesus as the only true mediator of God's forgiveness in contrast with Jewish brokers of forgiveness, but also underplays the role of John the Baptist as a mediator of God's forgiveness. This becomes apparent when John's role as a mediator of forgiveness in the Gospel according to Mark is compared with his role in Matthew. The latter, for example, omits the reference in Mark 1:4b (καὶ κηρῦσσω βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν) to John the Baptist conferring the forgiveness of sin through his baptism of sinners in his version (3:2). For Matthew the reference to the forgiveness of sins is more appropriate as a description of Jesus' death (τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶν τὸ αἷμα μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν; 26:28) than of the baptism of John (Gundry 1982:528; Davies & Allison 1997:474).

A common critique of Jesus' ministry is that he granted forgiveness to sinners without first demanding their repentance (Jeremias 1971:119; Sanders 1989:204–205). This would have resulted in those he forgave as still being considered to be sinners by their fellow Jews. In Matthew, conduct (i.e. contrition and restitution) that testify to the authenticity of a person's repentance are, however, the expected response to both John and Jesus' call to repentance (cf. 3:2; 4:17). John, for example, demanded deeds that reflected repentance (ποιήσατε οὖν καρπὸν ἄξιον τῆς μετανοίας; 3:8) whilst Jesus' instruction on how a brother, who had been wronged by a fellow brother, should reconcile with him, makes forgiveness of the transgressor conditional on his remorse (18:15–20). If the transgressor did not have remorse after being admonished by his fellow brother or a delegation of fellow believers, he was to be cut off from the community. It is thus incorrect to claim that the Matthean Jesus never demands repentance or remorse from transgressors.

It is also apparent that the Matthean Jesus, during his public ministry, considered sacrificial offers to be part of the process of obtaining forgiveness from God. In 5:24 Jesus refers to a man, who, whilst in the process of giving a sacrifice,<sup>17</sup> remembers that his brother had something against him. He promptly leaves his sacrifice at the altar in order to first go and reconcile with his brother before returning to give his offering to God. This short illustration is not a denial of the necessity of giving offerings to God, but rather a confirmation of its importance, since it underlines that it should be done wholeheartedly (Jeremias 1971:193). Seeking forgiveness from God through the giving of an offering, presupposes a similar inclination to seek forgiveness of those who had been wronged.

17. The saying in Mark 11:25 (καὶ ὅταν στήκετε προσευχόμενοι, ἀφίετε εἰ τι ἔχετε κατὰ τινος, ἵνα καὶ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφῆ ὑμῖν τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν) differs from Matthew's version. Whilst Matthew refers to somebody who, in the process of giving an offer, remembers that he had offended somebody else, Mark refers to a praying person who forgives an offense committed against him (France 2007:2002–2003). Matthew also omits the reason why the offender should be forgiven.

Jesus also commanded a leper whom he had healed, to go and give a purification offer in the temple before showing himself to the priests (8:1–4). In this instance Jesus envisions a role for both the temple and its priests in the process by which those who had been healed by him could be reintegrated with their communities (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:70–74).

There are, however, also examples in Matthew (cf. 9:1–8) where Jesus did not explicitly command those he had healed to give an offering in the temple. Whilst Jesus therefore at times relativised the importance of giving sacrificial offerings, he did not necessarily oppose the temple cult as such, but rather the reduction of the process of obtaining forgiveness to the mere observance of external rituals. In line with the demand of Hosea 6:6, which states that God demands mercy rather than offerings (9:13), cultic acts not correlating with an appropriate inner attitude, is of no value to the Matthean Jesus (Davies & Allison 1988:578).

Despite positive references to the temple by Jesus, there are also pronouncements of Jesus (e.g. 12:6; 26:61; 27:40) that, combined with his symbolic action in the temple (21:12–17), suggest that Matthew considered the temple as irrelevant for his own community from both a historical and a theological viewpoint. Historically he was writing almost two decades after its destruction so that even if the temple had been important during Jesus' public ministry it was no longer so for the post-war Matthean community. Theologically the crucifixion was the final sacrifice, which, for Matthew, had inaugurated God's new covenant and through which Jesus had permanently effected the forgiveness of the sins of his people, and thereby making the temple, and the sin offerings associated with it, obsolete. This is clear from the manner in which Matthew, in 26:28, redacts Mark's account of the Last Supper (Mk 14:17–27) by adding a conjunction (γάρ) at the beginning of Mark 14:24 and an interpretive εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν at the end (Nolland 2005:1078). Matthew thus links the new covenant, which the Old Testament prophets had related to the forgiveness of sin (cf. Ezk 16:63; Jr 31:34), with Jesus' coming death. For Matthew, Jesus had taken the place of the temple and all sacrificial offerings, and had thus inaugurated a new covenant between God and his people.

## The disciples as agents of forgiveness

According to Matthew the disciples, and after them the Matthean community, continue the ministry of Jesus, since the authority to forgive sins, heal the sick and cast out demons was specifically given to his followers (cf. 10:1, 7–8; 16:19; 18:18). Matthew, in his conclusion of the story of healing the paralytic, adds a reference in 9:8b to his source (Mk 2:12), which states that the crowd praised God for the authority that he had given to men (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις [human beings]). This authority is not given to humanity in general, but rather to Peter and the church (cf. 16:19, 18:17). It is them who receive the assurance that God would sanction their decisions (Hagner 1995:532).

Since healing implies forgiveness for Matthew, Jesus' commissioning of the disciples to go forth and heal in 10:1 also implied a ministry of forgiveness by them. It is, according to Matthew, thus not only Jesus, but also his followers to whom God had given the authority to heal and to forgive (Hagner 1993:234; Davies & Allison 1997:96).

For Matthew his community is a family of brothers (and sisters) who have experienced God's forgiveness and who should therefore also forgive those who transgress against them. There are, however, limits to forgiveness according to Matthew. In the first instance not everyone's sins are forgiven, since God's judgement remains a reality for those who opposed his will (21:33–45; 25:31–46). Secondly, those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit by continuously opposing the saving work of God through Jesus will also not be forgiven (12:31–32). Forgiveness can, thirdly, be forfeited if it does not produce fruits of forgiveness in those who had received God's forgiveness (6:12, 14–15; 18:23–35). It is noteworthy that the emphasis in Matthew is primarily on the one who had been transgressed against to grant forgiveness (6:12, 14–15; 18:12–14, 15–17, 21, 23). The exception to this pattern is the example in 5:23–25 where it is the one giving an offering who had transgressed.

## Conclusion

In his βίος of Jesus, Matthew addresses the motif of forgiveness from the perspective of the aftermath of the destruction of the temple, the death and resurrection of Jesus, escalating conflict with 1st century Judaism and internal strife. It is clear that understanding God's forgiveness and its implication for interpersonal forgiveness was a deep concern for Matthew and his community. In order to address this concern, he re-interprets and adds to Mark's material on forgiveness. It should therefore not be a surprise that Matthew contains a number of perspectives on the motif of forgiveness. However, in reading it as an ancient biography (βίος) and noting how the different perspectives on forgiveness are integrated in its arrangement (τάξις [taking its genre seriously]) it becomes apparent that Matthew has (contra Seeley) presented a unified and coherent understanding of the motif of forgiveness.

The inclusion formed by the announcement of Jesus as the one who would teach and heal (4:23), and the summary of his ministry (9:35), connects the narration of Jesus' teaching (5:3–7:27) to that of his deeds (8:2–9:34). It is in order to indicate that, as an honourable person, Jesus' actions are in agreement with his words and in alignment with both his birth and death described in the pro- and epilogue of Matthew respectively. The pro- and epilogue are linked by the promise that God would be active in the ministry of Jesus (1:23), and that the resurrected Jesus would always be with his followers (28:20). The final command of the resurrected Jesus to his surviving disciples in the epilogue, viz. to teach all future disciples everything he had taught them (and thus also his ethics of forgiveness), ties the ministry of Jesus to the on-going mission of the church. The sacrifice of Jesus as the means by which he had effected the permanent forgiveness

of the sins of his people, does not invalidate his ethics of forgiveness. It rather enabled his disciples to live according to it (cf. 18:23–35).

Whilst the climax of Matthew's βίος of Jesus is undoubtedly his death and resurrection, the teaching of Jesus remains relevant for his followers. It is, however, important to keep in mind that the first Gospel is not a fixed or static summary of the teaching of Jesus. It is a βίος that narrates the development and even the change in Jesus' teaching on the importance of sacrifices (cf. 5:24, 8:1–4, 9:13). It also narrates the relevance of the temple (cf. 12:6; 21:12–17; 26:61; 27:40) as well as the shift in the focus of Jesus' mission from Israel to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5; 15:24; 28:19). It is this dynamic story of Jesus' words and deeds that remained authoritative for Matthew's community.

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