Rikard Roitto

Moral Infringement and Repair in Antiquity

Supplement 3: *Forgiveness*

Studia Theologica Holmiensia *No.* **37**

Moral Infringement and Repair in Antiquity is a series of publications related to a project on Dynamics of Moral Repair in Antiquity, run by Thomas Kazen and Rikard Roitto between 2017 and 2021, and funded by the Swedish Research Council, grant nr. 2016-02319. The volumes contain stand-alone articles and serve as supplements to the main outcome of the project, the volume *Interpersonal Infringement and Moral Repair: Revenge, Compensation and Forgiveness in the Ancient World*, forthcoming on Mohr Siebeck in 2023.

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Preface

The present volume presents results from or related to the project "Dynamics of Moral Repair in Antiquity," funded by the Swedish Research Council, grant nr. 2016-02319, between 2017 and 2021. The main publication, *Interpersonal Infringement and Moral Repair: Revenge, Compensation and Forgiveness in the Ancient World* is forthcoming in 2023 with Mohr Siebeck, in the WUNT series.

However, during the course of the project we have also produced a number of journal articles and book chapters. Most of these are now being collected and republished by EHS (Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm = University College Stockholm) in a number of supplementary volumes, which will be available both in print and freely online.

Supplement 3: *Forgiveness*, contains four articles and chapters by Rikard Roitto, three of which belong to the preparation for or early phases of the project. They are republished in accordance with the publishers' general conditions for author reuse, or by special permission. Only minor corrections have been made. The sources are as follows:

"The Polyvalence of ἀφίημι and the Two Cognitive Frames of Forgiveness in the Synoptic Gospels," *Novum Testamentum* 57 (2015): 136–158.

"Forgiveness, Ritual and Social Identity in Matthew: Obliging Forgiveness," in *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Jutta Jokiranta, Samuel Byrskog, and Raimo Hakola; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 187–210.

"Practices of Confession, Intercession and Forgiveness in 1 John 1.9; 5.16," *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 232–253.

"Forgiveness of the Sinless: A Classic Contradiction in 1 John in the Light of Contemporary Forgiveness Research," in *Language, Cognition, and Biblical Exegesis: Interpreting Minds* (ed. Ronit Nikolsky, Fred Tappenden, and István Czachesz; London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 149–161.

Stockholm School of Theology, Bromma, June 2022
Thomas Kazen & Rikard Roitto

Contents

The Polyvalence of ἀφίημι and the Two Cognitive Frames of Forgiveness in the Synoptic Gospels

Abstract

Depending on whether God or a human is the forgiving agent in the Synoptic Gospels (and beyond), the verb valence of ἀφίημι, "forgive," differs in several ways. The present article argues that the differences are reflections in linguistic conventions of the cognition that only God can remove the substance of sin, while both God and humans can remit the moral debt of sin. Construction grammar, a linguistic theory which assumes that syntax and semantics are inseparable, is used in the analysis. Theological implications are discussed.

Introduction

When ἀφίημι is used with the meaning "forgive" in the Synoptic Gospels, the verb takes different accompanying arguments[1] depending on whether the one who forgives is God or a human being. I argue that this hitherto overlooked phenomenon can be explained if we assume that two different cognitive frames of forgiveness (imaginations of what forgiveness is) are operative in the Synoptic Gospels, one where sin is a substance that is removed through forgiveness and one where sin is a debt that is remitted through forgiveness. Within each imagination, a distinct

[1] For a linguistic statement to be complete, the predicate (a verb) needs to be accompanied by the correct number of *arguments* (also called *complements*). Each argument has *semantic role* (also called *thematic role* or *case role*) in relation to the predicate. For instance, "build" needs two arguments, 1) an agent (who builds) and, 2) a patient (that is built); e.g., "Lisa [agent] builds [predicate] a house [patient]." See e.g., B. Aarts, *English Syntax and Argumentation*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 91–97. In general, I have used the linguistic terms preferred in Mirjam Fried and Jan-Ola Östman's introduction to construction grammar, M. Fried and J-O. Östman, "Construction Grammar: A Thumbnail Sketch," in *Construction Grammar in a Cross-Language Perspective* (ed. M. Fried & J-O. Östman; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 11–86.

usage of ἀφίημι with its own verb valence[2] is evoked. Whereas God can be the forgiving agent in both cognitive frames, humans can only be the agent in the latter, which explains why some apparent syntactic possibilities do not turn up when a human being is the forgiving agent. Thus, the linguistic analysis has several theological implications.

Statistics on the Valence of ἀφίημι

In BDAG, the translation of ἀφίημι as "forgive" is placed under section 2, "to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence."[3] That is, BDAG assumes that the event "forgive" in early Christian texts is always modelled on remission of debt – an assumption that this article doubts. From the information provided by BDAG, we may infer that ἀφίημι takes three arguments when it means "forgive":

1. Agent: the forgiver (nominative case with the verb in the active voice).
2. Patient:[4] the sin/wrong (accusative case with the verb in the active voice).
3. Beneficiary: the one for whom the <patient> is forgiven (dative case).

A typical example is ἀφῇ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας, "He [agent] forgives the sins [patient] for us [beneficiary]" (1 John 1:9). BDAG also notes that sometimes the patient and/or the beneficiary is missing, for example ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, "your sins [patient] are forgiven" (Matt 9:2), or ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; "shall I forgive to him

[2] The *valence* of a verb is the expected number of arguments for the verb.

[3] BDAG s.v. ἀφίημι 2.

[4] We could also say that this argument has the semantic role *theme*, but I have chosen *patient* for the sake of simplicity. The semantic role *patient* is defined as "the 'undergoer' of an action" while *theme* is defined as the "the entity that is moved by the action," according to for instance the textbook of Aarts, *English Syntax*, 95. However, scholars disagree on how and if these two semantic roles should be distinguished, see e.g., B. J. Blake, *Case*, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 70–71; D. Dowty, "Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection," *Language* 67 (1991): 547–619. In New Testament scholarship working with semantic roles, S. S. M. Wong, *A Classification of Semantic Case-Relations in the Pauline Epistles* (New York: P. Lang, 1997), 244, suggests that this argument of ἀφίημι should be considered a patient. Paul L. Danove also suggests "patient" in *Linguistics and Exegesis in the Gospel of Mark: Applications of a Case Frame Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic 2001), 160. However, in his later work, *A Grammatical and Exegetical Study of New Testament Verbs of Transference: A Case Frame Guide to Interpretation and Translation* (Library of New Testament Studies. London: Continuum, 2009), 131–132, he subsumes the role patient under the role theme.

[beneficiary]?" (Matt 18:21).[5] However, neither BDAG nor any other linguistic analysis that I have been able to find notices that the verb takes different combinations of arguments depending on whether God or a human being is the agent. Table 1 to 3 show statistics of how the valence of ἀφίημι varies.[6] The first number in each cell of the tables is the count in the Synoptic Gospels and the second number the total for the whole New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers. We see several interesting phenomena in the tables, which can be summarized in these five (somewhat overlapping) points:

a. When God is the agent, there is considerable variation whether the beneficiary, the patient, or both, are mentioned, but when a human is the agent, the by far most frequent case is to mention only the beneficiary.
b. Only when God is the agent, we have the combination where the patient is mentioned but not the beneficiary.
c. Almost without exception, the patient is ἁμαρτία only when God is the agent.[7]
d. Almost without exception, the patient (usually ἁμαρτία) is only mentioned when God is the agent.[8]
e. Only when God is the agent, the verb takes passive form.

[5] The translations of the beneficiary argument in this paper are sometimes somewhat clumsy on purpose, since more idiomatic translations to English like "He forgives us our sins" gives the impression that the forgiven person has the semantic role of patient.

[6] The following are left out of the statistics, since it is debatable whether the agent should be considered human or divine: Matt 18:27; 18:32, a parable where the metaphorical agent is a human king in the source/vehicle but God in the target/tenor; Mark 2:10; Matt 9:6; Luke 5:24; 7:49, where Jesus, the intermediary of God, is the agent. The latter texts will be analysed below.

[7] The one exception, John 20:23, will be discussed below.

[8] The two exceptions, Matt 6:14 and John 20:23, will be discussed below.

Table 1. Valence	God is the agent	A human being is the agent
Both patient and beneficiary are mentioned	7, 15 occurrences[9]	1, 1 occurrence[10]
The patient is mentioned, but not the beneficiary	9, 14 occurrences[11]	0, 1 occurrence[12]
The beneficiary is mentioned but not the patient	6, 13 occurrences[13]	7, 8 times[14]
Neither the beneficiary nor the patient is mentioned	0, 0 occurrences	1, 4 occurrences[15]

Table 2. The patient argument	God is the agent	A human being is the agent
The patient is ἁμαρτία	13, 22 occurrences[16]	0, 1 occurrences[17]
The patient is παράπτωμα	2, 2 occurrences[18]	1, 1 occurrence[19]
The patient is ὀφείλημα	1, 2 occurrences[20]	0, 0 occurrences
The patient is ἡ ἐπίνοια τῆς καρδίας σου	0, 1 occurrence[21]	0, 0 occurrences
The patient is ἀνομία	0, 3 occurrences[22]	0, 0 occurrences
The patient is not mentioned	6, 13 occurrences[23]	8, 12 occurrences[24]

[9] Mark 3:28; 11:25; Matt 6:12; 12:31; Luke 5:20; 5:23; 11:4; Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9; 2:12; *1 Clem.* 50:5; 53:4; 60:1; Herm. *Vis.* 2.2.4; *Did.* 8:2.

[10] Matt 6:14.

[11] Mark 2:5; 2:7; 2:9; Matt 6:15; 9:2; 9:5; Luke 5:21; 7:47; 7:48; Rom 4:7; *1 Clem.* 50:6; Herm. *Sim.* 7.1.4; *Did.* 11:7 (x2).

[12] John 20:23.

[13] Mark 4:12; Matt 6:14; 12:32; Luke 7:47; 12:10; [23:34]; John 20:23; Jam 5:15; *1 Clem.* 13:2; 51:1; Ign. *Phld.* 8:1; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2.

[14] Matt 6:12; 6:15; 18:21; 18:35; Luke 11:4; 17:3; 17:4; Did. 8:2.

[15] Mark 11:25; 1 Clem 13:2; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2.

[16] Mark 2:5; 2:7; 2:9; 3:28; Matt 9:2; 9:5; 12:31; Luke 5:20; 5:21; 5:23; 7:47; 7:48; 11:4; Jam 5:15; 1 John 1:9; 2:12; *1 Clem.* 50:5; 53:4; Herm. *Vis.* 2.2.4; Herm. *Sim.* 7.1.4; *Did.* 11:7 (2x).

[17] John 20:23.

[18] Mark 11:25; Matt 6:15.

[19] Matt 6:14.

[20] Matt 6:12; Did. 8:2.

[21] Acts 8:22.

[22] Rom 4:7; *1 Clem.* 50:6; 60:1. (In *1 Clem.* 60:1, the patient is actually τὰς ἀνομίας ἡμῶν καὶ τὰς ἀδικίας καὶ τὰ παραπτώματα καὶ πλημμελείας.)

[23] Mark 4:12; Matt 6:14; 12:32; Luke 7:47b(?); 12:10; [23:34]; John 20:23; Jam 5:15; *1 Clem.* 13:2; 51:1; Ign. *Phld.* 8:1; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2. (Luke 7:47b, ᾧ δὲ ὀλίγον ἀφίεται, is a difficult case. Since the adjective ὀλίγον is neuter and has no definite article, ὀλίγον could be an adverbial expression, an attribute to an implicit but unmentioned patient in the neuter such as παράπτωμα, or even the

Table 3. Voice	God is the agent	A human being is the agent
ἀφίημι is used in the active voice	8, 15 occurrences[25]	9, 14 occurrences[26]
ἀφίημι is used the passive voice	14, 27 occurrences[27]	0, 0 occurrences

Can Null Complements Explain the Variation?

Paul Danove, who has researched verb valence in the New Testament extensively, explains the variations in the valence of ἀφίημι, meaning forgive, (as well as many other Greek verbs) with a linguistic phenomenon called "null complements."[28] ("Null complements" are sometimes called "optional arguments" in other research on valence.[29]) A "null complement" is an argument that is permissible to leave out in a correct sentence if it can be inferred.[30] Danove distinguishes two kinds of null complements: A "definite null complement" is an argument that can be left out if it can be derived from its context. An "indefinite null complement," on the other hand, can be left out even if there is nothing in the context to indicate what it is. In such cases, we infer from general expectations what the implicit argument might be.

According to Danove, when the verb ἀφίημι means "forgive," the beneficiary is a definite null complement.[31] That is, mention of who is forgiven can be left out from the clause if something in the context hints who it is. The patient, on the other hand, is an indefinite null complement. That is, the wrong that is forgiven can be left unmentioned in a correct clause, since the reader can infer what is

patient. However, since it is neuter it is probably adverbial, cf. Mark 1:19; 6:31; 1 Pet 1:6; 5:10; Rev 17:10.)

[24] Mark 11:25; Matt 6:12; 6:15; 18:21; 18:35; Luke 11:4; 17:3; 17:4; *1 Clem.* 13:2; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2; *Did.* 8:2.

[25] Mark 2:7; 11:25; Matt 6:12, 6:14; 6:15; Luke 5:21; 11:4; [23:34]; 1 John 1:9; *1 Clem*. 53:4; 60:1; Ign. *Phld.* 8:1; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2; *Did.* 8:2.

[26] Mark 11:25; Matt 6:12; 6:14; 6:15; 18:21; 18:35; Luke 11:4; 17:3; 17:4; John 20:23; *1 Clem.* 13:2; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2; *Did.* 8:2.

[27] Mark 2:5; 2:9; 3:28; 4:12; Matt 9:2; 9:5; 12:31; 12:32; Luke 5:20; 5:23; 7:47 (2x); 7:48; 12:10; John 20:23; Acts 8:22; Rom 4:7; Jam 5:15; 1 John 2:12; *1 Clem.* 13:2; 50:5; 50:6; 51:1; Herm. *Vis.* 2.2.4; Herm. *Sim.* 7.1.4; *Did.* 11:7 (2x).

[28] Danove, *Linguistics and Exegesis*, 49–52, 160; Danove, *Verbs of Transference,* 13–17.

[29] E.g., G. Helbig and W. Schenkel, *Wörterbuch zur Valenz und Distribution deutscher Verben*, 8th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991), 31–39, use the term "fakultative Valenz."

[30] Danove uses the terminology of C. J. Fillmore "Pragmatically Controlled Zero Anaphora," in *Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (ed. N. Nikiforidou et al.; Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Linguistics Society, 1986), 95–107.

[31] Danove, *Linguistics and Exegesis*, 160.

forgiven from general expectations. As he points out, this is a frequent phenomenon in Greek three-place verbs (verbs with a valence of three arguments).[32] Danove's analysis of three-place verbs has important explanatory value, since it can explain many of the variations recorded in the table above. His analysis will be our starting point. However, the linguistic phenomenon of null complements cannot explain all our observations. For instance, it cannot explain

a. why the texts avoid explicating the patient when a human is the agent,
b. why the combination with patient but no beneficiary appears only when God is the agent, and
c. why the passive voice is used only when God is the agent.

We may suspect that the syntactic differences indicate that divine forgiveness was somehow perceived as qualitatively different from human forgiveness. The problem, I argue, is that Danove (just like BDAG) assumes that ἀφίημι is always a three-place verb when it means "forgive."

Two Cognitions of Forgiveness: Removing a Substance and Releasing a Debt

Gary Anderson has recently analysed how Jews and Christians have understood sin as analogous to substance and debt in his monograph *Sin: A History*.[33] With the aid of conceptual metaphor theory,[34] he argues that in pre-exilic texts sin is thought of as a substance, either a burden or a stain. His most thorough analysis concerns the Hebrew word, נשׂא, "forgive," which literally means "lift, carry." The expression נשׂא עון can mean both "forgive [i.e., carry away] sin" and "bear (punishment for) sin." Such linguistic peculiarities are only possible if sin and forgiveness are cognitively modelled on the concrete human experience of burdens.[35]

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[32] Danove, *Verbs of Transference*, 13–17.

[33] G. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). Anderson is not the first to observe that sin understood as substance or debt in Jewish and Christian thinking. Rather, much of his basic insights can be found in standard exegetical dictionaries, e.g., M. G. Vanzant, "Forgiveness," *NIDB* 2 (2007): 480–485; J. S. Kselman, "Forgiveness," *ABD* 2 (1992): 831–833. However, since Anderson uses cognitive semantics in his analysis, he is able to show the implications of these observations better than previous studies.

[34] G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980); G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[35] Anderson, *Sin*, 17–21.

Anderson then argues that during the exile there was a major shift in how Jewish texts talk about sin. When Jews came into contact with Aramaic, they adopted Aramaic idioms for sin, which were modelled on monetary debt. For instance, Aramaic Targums consistently translate נשׂא עון to שׁבק חובה, "remit debt," Anderson points out.[36] This, in turn, not only changed how they imagined sin but also the remedies for sin. The imagination of forgiveness changed from removing a substance to remitting a debt. With the cognitive frame of debt, new ways of thinking about sin developed, such as the idea that one could pay the debt of sin through suffering and good deeds.[37]

Anderson's analysis is compelling, and my argument builds on his results. There is, however, one important modification I would like to make. Anderson claims that the metaphor of substance "was replaced" by the metaphor of debt.[38] I would say that a more accurate description of the development is that the metaphor of debt became prevalent, but without eradicating the metaphor of substance. In post-exilic Judaism, including early Christianity, both the cognitive frame of substance and the cognitive frame of debt were used to understand sin and forgiveness. For instance, the post-exilic language of sin as something that renders the sinner morally unclean is unintelligible unless the substance-imagination was alive and well in Jewish cognition (e.g., Sir 23:10; 38:10; 1 Macc 1:48; Philo, *Cher.* 28:91–95; *Jub.* 9:15; 1QS III, 13–14).[39] The idea of sin as substance, which needs to be lifted, cleansed, or covered, was also part of early Christian thinking and language on sin and forgiveness (e.g., John 1:29; 2 Tim 3:6; Heb 1:3; 9:28; 10:2, 4, 11; 12:1, 4; Jam 3:6; 1 Pet 4:8; 2 Pet 1:9; 1 John 1:7, 9; Rev 7:14; 22:14). In the Synoptic Gospels, sin is perceived of as substance when Jesus claims that moral evil defiles the sinner (Mark 7:20–23; Matt 15:18–19).

Why Did the Translators of the Septuagint Choose ἀφίημι?

In extra-Biblical Greek, ἀφίημι is not used to talk about forgiveness. LSJ does not even mention "forgive" as a possible translation for ἀφίημι.[40] Bauer-Aland man-

[36] Anderson, *Sin*, 27–39.

[37] Anderson, *Sin,* 40–188.

[38] Anderson, *Sin,* 27.

[39] Cf. T. Kazen, *Issues of Impurity in Early Judaism* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010) esp. 13–40; J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[40] LSJ, 9th ed. (1996), s.v. ἀφίημι. (There is nothing in the supplement either.)

ages to find a limited number of non-Jewish examples, though.[41] The word that comes closest to "forgive" in extra-Biblical Greek is *συγγιγνώσκω*.[42] Therefore, the Christian usage of ἀφίημι to say "forgive" is best explained by the fact that the Septuagint frequently choose to translate סלח and נשׂא, the two most common Hebrew words for "forgive," with ἀφίημι.[43]

Why did the translators of the Septuagint choose ἀφίημι? We will never know. However, the general tendency of "semantic borrowing" in the Septuagint is pedagogically described by Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva:

> The process [of semantic borrowing] is fairly clear: speakers first notice some semantic correspondence between a word in their language and a similar word in the foreign language, then proceed to bring the usage ... of the two closer together. ... semantic borrowing involves extending the area covered by one word so that the overlap becomes greater or even complete.[44]

Still, why not choose *συγγιγνώσκω*, like Josephus (e.g., *Ant*. 2.145, 154; 3.23; 6.151, 219, 303)? Why not *συγγνώμη* or *ἀμνηστία* together with a fitting verb, like Philo (e.g., *Spec.* 1.42, 229, 235–236, 242; 2:23; 3.121)?[45] At first glance, there seems to be little reason to choose ἀφίημι.

As we can only speculate about why the translators chose ἀφίημι, I will allow myself to do so. Suppose the translators of the Septuagint perceived forgiveness of sin both as removing a substance and as relieving a debt. If so, they would have to find a Greek word that could accommodate both these cognitive frames – and ἀφίημι, in its astonishing polysemy, is able to do just that with a little bit of semantic borrowing. ἀφίημι can mean "send away (an object)," which fits the cognition

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[41] W. Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th ed. (ed. K. Aland and B. Aland; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988) s.v. ἀφίημι.

[42] However, David Konstan has argued convincingly that *συγγιγνώσκω* matches neither ancient Jewish concepts of forgiveness, nor our modern ideas of forgiveness. D. Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 22–59.

[43] Note, however, that the Pauline tradition prefers χαρίζομαι to ἀφίημι (2 Cor 2:7, 10; 12:13; Eph 4:32; Col 2:13; 3:13).

[44] K. H. Jobes and M. Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 108–109; cf. M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*. (Rev. and expanded ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 53–100.

[45] Philo uses ἀφίημι in the sense "forgive" in a few direct quotes from the Septuagint, e.g., *Her.* 1.20; *Det.* 1.141. Josephus occasionally uses ἀφίημι in the sense "forgive" or "pardon," e.g., *A.J.* 2.146; 6.92. However, Josephus uses the construction "*c. acc. pers. et gen. rei*" noted in LSJ, 9th ed. (1996), s.v. ἀφίημι A.II.1.c, rather than the constructions used in early Christian literature (which will be discussed below).

of removing the substance of sin. It can also mean "remit (a debt)," which fits the cognition of forgiving the debt of sin.

A Construction Grammar Analysis of the Conventional Greek Use of ἀφίημι

Our next step is to use the conventions developed in construction grammar to describe the syntactic and semantic qualities of ἀφίημι in a way that helps us understand how the verb can function to denote "send/let an object on a trajectory" and "remit a debt for someone."[46] The fundamental idea of construction grammar is that syntax and semantics are not separable in real language. Rather, language consists of "constructions" which have both semantic and syntactic properties.[47]

One of the basic assumptions of construction grammar is "The Principle of No Synonymy," which means that "If two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct."[48] For instance, the verb "drink" is part of several syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically, distinct constructions, such as: "I drink water," where the beverage needs to be mentioned; "I do not drink," where some kind of alcoholic beverage is implied but should be left unmentioned; and "I drink you under the table," where a drinking-fellow and the expression "under the table" is expected to accompany the verb. With this approach to language, a word like ἀφίημι, in all its polysemy and polyvalence, cannot

[46] There are several other meanings of ἀφίημι mentioned in LSJ, 9th ed. (1996), s.v. ἀφίημι, which I will not analyze here.

[47] Introductions to construction grammar can be found in e.g., J-O. Östman and M. Fried, "Historical and Intellectual Background of Construction Grammar," in *Construction Grammar in a Cross-Language Perspective* (ed. M. Fried & J-O. Östman; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 1–10; M. Fried and J-O. Östman, "Thumbnail Sketch"; A. E. Goldberg, *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995); T. Hoffmann and G. Trousdale, "Construction Grammar: Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (ed. T. Hoffmann and G. Trousdale; Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013), 1–14.

In New Testament scholarship, the use of construction grammar (and its sister theory, frame semantics) has been pioneered by Simon Wong and Paul Danove (references in note 4). Their usage of case grammar (one of the predecessors of construction grammar) has been criticized in S. E. Porter and A. W. Pitts, "New Testament Greek Language and Linguistics in Recent Research," *Currents in Biblical Research* 6 (2008): 214–255, 228–230 since case grammar does not adopt a typology-based approach to semantic roles. However, for the purposes of this paper, that criticism is irrelevant, since I am primarily concerned with the pairing of syntax and semantics into constructions.

[48] Goldberg, *Constructions*, 67.

be a construction by itself, but is part of many different constructions, which evoke many different cognitive frames. In our analysis of ἀφίημι, the important aspects of each construction to describe are a) semantic frame elements (different parts of the cognition evoked in our minds by the construction), and b) valence.[49]

According to LSJ, one basic meaning of ἀφίημι with two arguments (agent and patient) is "send forth" and "send away."[50] LSJ also suggests several other ways to translate the word in different contexts, for instance "put forth," "discharge," "let loose," and "let go." All these usages of the word evoke the basic event "a sender sends/lets an object on a trajectory" and apply it by metaphorical extension to different kinds of events.[51] The construction is described in figure 1.

Figure 1. **Construction: "A sender <u>sends/lets</u> an object on a trajectory"**

Head lexeme: ἀφίημι

Semantic frame elements	#1 Sender #2 Sent object #3 Trajectory #4 Goal	
Valence	#1 Agent	Nominative case in active voice. ὑπό + genitive case in the passive voice.
	#2 Patient	Accusative case in active voice. Nominative case in the passive voice.

A few explanatory notes: A "head lexeme" is the lexical form of the verb functioning as predicate and thus governing the construction. In the section called the "semantic frame elements," I have described the most important (but not all) frame elements that are evoked in our cognition when we think about the event "send/let an object on a trajectory." All of these elements may be part of a correct and meaningful sentence, but only the arguments enumerated under the section "valence"

[49] Construction grammar analyses can look very technical, but I will avoid unnecessary formalization. A full description of a construction should contain exhaustive information about it, for instance phonology, morphology, syntactic properties, evoked semantic frames and pragmatic information. However, most analyses that utilize construction grammar are selective and describe only those aspects that are relevant for a particular problem. M. Fried and J-O. Östman, "Thumbnail Sketch."

[50] LSJ, 9th ed. (1996), s.v. ἀφίημι A.I–II.

[51] BDAG s.v. ἀφίημι 1 defines this usage similarly as "to dismiss or release someone or someth. from a place or one's presence." Cf. L&N §15.43–44.

are necessary for making the sentence a meaningful one. The numbers connect the different semantic roles to the different frame element. In this case, the semantic role agent is the sender, and the semantic role patient is the sent object.

In the lexical entry of LSJ, the usage of ἀφίημι in the sense "remit" is hidden away under section A.II.2.c. There it is rightly noted that the valence is different for this usage: "c. dat. pers. et acc. rei." That is, the verb now has a third argument, a beneficiary. Moreover, the cognitive frame evoked by this usage is quite distinct from other usages in section A.II of the entry. Had the entry been arranged according to the principles of construction grammar, the specialized meaning together with the differing valence would have merited this usage a new section in the entry.[52] BDAG, on the other hand, has a new section for this usage.[53] The construction is described in figure 2.

Figure 2. **Construction: "A benefactor <u>remits</u> a bond/debt/obligation for a person"**

Head lexeme: ἀφίημι

Semantic frame elements	#1 Benefactor #2 Bond/debt/obligation #3 Person for whom <#2> is remitted	
Valence	#1 Agent	Nominative case in active voice. ὑπό + genitive case in the passive voice.
	#2 Patient	Accusative case in active voice. Nominative case in the passive voice.
	#3 Beneficiary	Dative case.

Thus we have two different usages of ἀφίημι, which with a little bit of semantic borrowing (see above) can accommodate the two different cognitions of forgiveness of sin. The construction "A sender sends/lets an object on a trajectory" can be used to describe removal of the substance sin, and the construction "A benefactor remits a bond/debt/obligation for a person" can be used to describe the remission of the debt of sin. The remainder of the present article explores how this distinction applies to a number of key passages in the Synoptic Gospels in order to describe and interpret, as adequately as possible, the constructions in which ἀφίημι appears with the meaning "forgive."

[52] On using construction grammar to structure dictionary entries, see Danove, *Verbs of Transference*, 168–170. On the difficulty of writing dictionary entries, see. J. A. L. Lee. *A History of New Testament Lexicography* (New York: P. Lang, 2003), 3–13.

[53] BDAG s.v. ἀφίημι 1.

The Story of the Paralytic Whose Sins are Forgiven

In the story of healed paralytic whose sins are forgiven in Mark 2:1–12, ἀφίημι is consistently used without the semantic role beneficiary. In the two passive formulations, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, (2:5, 9), the agent is missing, and the only explicitly mentioned argument is the patient, σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι.[54] In the two active formulations, τίς δύναται ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ θεός; (2:7) and ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας (2:10), the semantic roles agent and patient are spelled out.

No Beneficiary Argument and No Omission of the Patient Argument

If ἀφίημι is used to talk about removing sin, we should expect a patient but no beneficiary. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the story works with a concept of forgiveness as removal of substance rather than remission of debt, since the pericope consistently uses ἀφίημι without mentioning a beneficiary argument. This impression is further strengthened if we look at the context and content of the narrative.

The narrative is part of a range of pericopae in the beginning of the Gospel of Mark that together serve to show Jesus' ἐξουσία, "authority/power" (1:21–2:12, esp. 1:22, 27; 2:10). The plot of the story is whether Jesus has the capacity (δύναται, 2:7) to do what only God can do. As the statistics above show, God is normally the agent in the combination where the patient is mentioned but not a beneficiary, which evokes the substance-frame of forgiveness. The question "Who can forgive sin but one, God?" is intelligible only if it evokes the cognitive frame of forgiveness that is uniquely linked with God in early Christian literature – removal of the substance of sin.

The story also plays on the widely held belief that there was a connection between sin and disease.[55] That Jesus can remove the bodily sickness proves that Jesus has also removed its cause, sin. In Jewish thinking, sin sometimes *causes God* to punish with sickness (e.g., Ex 20:5; Lev 26:14–33; Deut 28:15–16; 2 Chr 12:12–19). Sometimes *sin itself* becomes a destructive power or opens way for a demonic power that causes sickness and moral weakness (e.g., Ps 38:4; 40:12–13; Prov 5:22;

[54] Against the possibility that σου is a genitive of separation and thus a beneficiary rather than a genitive attribute to αἱ ἁμαρτίαι speaks a) that no such usage of genitive with ἀφίημι is noted in either LSJ or BDAG, b) the existence of "syntactic contamination," to be discussed below.

[55] W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Vol. 2, Commentary on Matthew VIII–XVIII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 89. Cf. Str-B 1.495–496.

Wis 11:15f; Rom 5:12–8:39; 11QPs[a] XIX, 13–16). Both these cognitions are compatible with the idea of sin as dangerous substance that needs to be removed. The play on a connection between sin and sickness in the story therefore strengthens the case that the valence of ἀφίημι in this passage is used to evoke the removal-frame.

The impression from Mark is intact in Matthew's version of the story (9:1–8), which largely preserves Mark's version.[56] Just like Mark, Matthew places the story in a literary context where Jesus' ἐξουσία is central. At the end of the Sermon of the Mount, people are amazed by his ἐξουσία (7:28–29). The sermon is followed by a number of pericopae where Jesus exercises this power (8:1–9:35). Thereafter the disciples are given ἐξουσία (10:1).

One fascinating modification in Matthew is worth attention, though. The story ends with praise of "God who has given such authority to *humans*" (τὸν θεὸν τὸν δόντα ἐξουσίαν τοιαύτην τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, 9:8). This verse probably hints the same idea as Matthew 18:15–20. There, the Matthean community is entrusted with the authority to make authoritative halakhic decisions and mediate divine forgiveness (esp. 18:18).[57] The Matthean text consistently avoids describing interpersonal forgiveness as removal of a substance (6:12, 14–15; 8:20–35), so when this text talks about human authority to forgive sin in the substance-frame, it probably extends the authority given to Jesus in Markan version to the community of his followers.[58]

In the story of the forgiven paralytic, the patient argument is consistently spelled out and never omitted. According to Danove's analysis (presented above), it is allowed to leave out the patient argument for predicates with three arguments, since it can be inferred from general expectations (indefinite null complement). This is only true when forgiveness is modelled on remission of debt, which is expressed with a linguistic construction with three arguments. When forgiveness removes the substance of sin, there is not one example in early Christian literature where the patient argument is omitted. Moreover, the patient is without exception ἁμαρτία (Mark 2:5; 2:7; 2:9; Matt 9:2; 9:5; Luke 5:21; 7:47a; 7:48; John 20:23; Rom 4:7; *1 Clem.* 50:6; Herm. *Sim.* 7.1.4; *Did.* 11:7). These observations strongly suggest

[56] On textual variants, see note 61.

[57] Scholars do not agree whether "bind" and "loose" in Matt 18:18 refer to the right to issue halakhic prescripts (which is a reasonable interpretation of the parallel in 16:18) or the right to mediate divine forgiveness (or both). Given the literary context of 18:18, I agree with Ulrich Luz that the inclusion of the latter is probable for at least 18:18; U. Luz *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 454–455.

[58] R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 165.

that we are dealing with a linguistic construction which is distinct from that of debt frame.

In sum, what we have described is a construction with two arguments, agent and patient. Within usage-based construction grammar, the goal is to describe as accurately as possible how a construction is used in actual language.[59] Therefore, we suggest that in the prototypical usage of this construction, there are not only syntactic but also semantic expectations: a) the agent should be God, and b) the patient should be ἁμαρτία.

Redundancy in Luke

Luke modifies Mark's two usages of ἀφίημι in the passive form. He conflates the two possibilities ἀφέωνταί αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου and ἀφέωνταί σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι into ἀφέωνταί σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου (5:20, 23).[60] That is, he adds a redundant beneficiary argument, σοι, to Mark's text without removing the genitive attribute, σου, which also functions to tell us who is forgiven. This double indication of who is forgiven recurs a few more times in early Christian texts, so Luke is not alone to do this (Mark 11:25; Matt 6:12 // Luke 11:4 // *Did.* 8:2; Acts 8:22; *1 Clem.* 60:1; a few text variants of Matt 9:2[61]). It is also difficult to know why he changes Mark here, considering that he uses the construction without beneficiary in 7:47a (ἀφέωνται αἱ ἁμαρτίαι αὐτῆς) and 7:48 (ἀφέωνταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι), which is uniquely Lukan.

The phenomenon could possibly be explained by the linguistic phenomenon called "contamination" or "blending," where two syntactically and semantically similar constructions are fused into a new construction.[62] If so, the existence of these examples of contamination is a further indication that Danove's explanation is not the whole truth. Rather, an unnecessary double indication of whose sins are forgiven could be the result of a blend of two separate but related ways to talk about forgiveness – one where the forgiven person is indicated with a genitive attribute to the patient argument, and one where the forgiven person has the semantic role of beneficiary.

Another possible explanation begins with the observation that redundant personal pronouns were quite common in Koine Greek. One of the functions of such

[59] J. L. Bybee, "Usage-based Theory and Exemplar Representations of Constructions," in *Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar* (ed. Hoffmann and Trousdale), 49–69.

[60] In Luke 5:23, some manuscripts, e.g., ℵ C D W θ, have σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι.

[61] L θ have ἀφίενταί σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου; D Δ^{c} have ἀφίενταί σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι.

[62] A. C. Harris and L. Campbell. *Historical Syntax in Cross-Linguistic Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 117–118.

redundancy was to create emphasis, but Chrys Caragounis has recently demonstrated that redundant pronouns, especially pronouns in the genitive case, appear frequently in the New Testament with no apparent function.[63] If so, we may suspect that Luke was influenced by the redundant use of a genitive pronoun in the Lord's Prayer (ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, Luke 11:4 // Matt 6:12 // *Did.* 8:2), a prayer that Luke quite possibly knew by heart. The construction in the Lord's Prayer is clearly in the debt frame (see analysis below), which means that Luke might have imported a syntax which is not fully sensitive to the narrative's understanding of what sin is.

The Use of the Passive Voice

In early Christian texts, the passive form of ἀφίημι is normally reserved for clauses where God is the agent, as the statistics above show. In all these cases, the agent argument is not mentioned, but the reader is supposed to be able to infer from context and linguistic conventions that God is the agent. This is the well-known linguistic phenomenon of *passivum divinum*.[64] Many verbs that are sometimes used to express *passivum divinum* are also on other occasions used in the passive with human agents. ἀφίημι, however, is never used in the passive form in discourse about interpersonal forgiveness. The passive form is reserved for divine agency in early Christian language conventions. We conclude that in early Christian discourse, the prototypical use of ἀφίημι in the passive voice is a) without explicit agent, but b) with God as the implicit agent.

In the story about the forgiven paralytic, the interpretation of the passive forms of ἀφίημι as *passivum divinum* becomes a bit more problematic. Tobias Hägerland has argued that the passive formulation, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι (2:5, 9), goes back to the historical Jesus and that the historical Jesus saw himself as a mediator of God's forgiveness.[65] The passive utterance would then be an unobjectionable *passivum divinum*. However, in the story told by Mark, the passive formulation causes confusion and accusation that Jesus blasphemes. Beniamin Pascut has recently argued that *passivum divinum* is a too simple interpretation of the

[63] C. Caragounis. *New Testament Language and Exegesis: A Diachronic Approach* (WUNT 323; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 99–112.

[64] J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: Vol. 1, The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1971), 9–14; cf. Danove, *Linguistics and Exegesis*, 121–124.

[65] T. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of his Prophetic Mission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

passives in 2:5, 9.[66] The plot of the pericope in Mark is not intelligible if Jesus is just stating what God has done, Pascut argues. Rather, the statements function performatively to effect forgiveness. If the passive is a performative utterance, we can understand both why the scribes become upset (2:6–7) and why the story concludes that the Son of Man does indeed have authority to forgive sins (2:10).

Is this authority independent of God's? The verb ἔχω in the phrase ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου opens up for the possibility that Jesus has authority independent of God's authority. Given the theology of Mark where Jesus is portrayed as God's agent of the kingdom of God (e.g., 1:11, 15; 9:7; 10:18, 45), Morna Hooker's interpretation is more reasonable. She suggests that Mark intends to say that authority of the Son of Man is dependent on God's, just like the authority of the "one like a human being" in Dan 7:13–14 is given by God.[67] Pascut allows that – theologically – God may still be considered the ultimate agent behind the miraculous actions performed by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, including the forgiveness of sins. We may therefore still consider the passive formulations in 2:5, 9 to be an indirect divine passive, since God is the ultimate power behind the efficacy of the speech-act.[68] Mark skilfully plays on the linguistic convention of *passivum divinum* to demonstrate Jesus' God-endowed authority.

The Lord's Prayer

All preserved versions of the Lord's prayer exhibit a peculiar syntactic asymmetry between how divine and human forgiveness is expressed. In the first clause, where God is the agent, both patient and beneficiary are mentioned. In the second clause, where the agent is human, the patient is omitted and only the beneficiary is referenced.

ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν· (Matt 6:12)

ἄφες ἡμῖν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφίεμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν· (*Did.* 8:2)

ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν· (Luke 11:4)

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[66] B. Pascut, "The So-Called Passivum Divinum in Mark's Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 54 (2012): 313–333.

[67] M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (BNTC, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 87–88.

[68] Pascut distinguishes between proper *passivum divinum* where God is the direct agent and indirect *passivum divinum* where God is the ultimate agent, but not the direct agent.

Limits to the Analogy Between Divine and Human Forgiveness

Both human and divine forgiveness is here clearly modelled on the debt-metaphor. In Matthew and the Didache, the metaphor for sin is ὀφείλημα/ὀφειλή, "debt," and in all three versions the beneficiary of human forgiveness is an ὀφειλέτης, "debtor."[69] In Matthew and the Didache ὡς indicates that divine and human forgiveness are analogous. The καὶ γάρ in Luke signals that interpersonal forgiveness is a reason for God's forgiveness. A survey of all instances in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers that express some kind of connection between God's forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness show that all but one (John 20:23, discussed below) are modelled on the debt-metaphor, which is indicated by an explicit mention of the beneficiary (Mark 11:25; Matt 6:12, 14–15; 18:21–35; Luke 11:4; *Did.* 8:2; 1 *Clem.* 13:2; Pol. *Phil.* 2:3; 6:2). That is, wherever God's forgiveness motivates interpersonal forgiveness, the process of forgiveness is described as remission of debt.

Nonetheless, all versions of the prayer for forgiveness in the Lord's prayer mention the patient when God is the agent but not when the agent is human. (This asymmetry can also be found in Mark 11:25.) Together with the general pattern that the patient is almost never mentioned when humans are forgiving agents (see the statistics above), these asymmetries indicate that in early Christian linguistic culture the nature of what was forgiven (the patient) was usually not specified in discourse about interpersonal forgiveness. We can only speculate as to why this linguistic convention developed, but perhaps the intuition that only God can forgive sin inspired speakers to leave out the patient argument.[70] Nevertheless, we may claim that in the prototypical use of ἀφίημι in discourse about interpersonal forgiveness, the patient argument should be left out.

One passage in Matthew partly deviates from the overall pattern just described. When Matthew wishes to reinforce the importance of interpersonal forgiveness after the Lord's prayer, he formulates the following.

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[69] Talking about sin as debt is an Aramaism, J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 92. Cf. the discussion above about Anderson, *Sin*.

[70] Unfortunately, space does not allow a detailed comparison with the Septuagint, but note that the few passages in the Septuagint that deal with interpersonal forgiveness and use the verb ἀφίημι explicate the patient argument (Gen 50:17; Sir 28:2; 1 Macc 13:39; Cf. Ex 10:17; 1 Sam 15:25; 25:28). The Septuagint also allows the patient in discourse on interpersonal forgiveness to be ἁμαρτία/ἁμάρτημα (Gen 50:17; Ex 10:17; 1 Sam 15:25).

a. Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν,
b. ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος·
b.' ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις,
a.' οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν. (6:14–15)

Here the patient, τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, is mentioned in a clause about interpersonal forgiveness. Content-wise the first half is an antithetical parallelism to the other half. Syntactically, however, the sentence forms a chiasm, where a and a' mentions τὰ παραπτώματα, but not b and b'. We may therefore assume that the striving for a symmetric sentence structure got the upper hand over linguistic conventions in this particular case. Nevertheless, interpersonal forgiveness is still modelled on remission of debt since the beneficiary is mentioned. Moreover, Matthew chooses the word παράπτωμα – a word that is used only here in Matthew – probably in order to avoid the word ἁμαρτία. (All passages in Matthew that expresses some kind of connection between divine and human forgiveness use the debt-frame and avoid the term ἁμαρτία, 6:12, 14–15; 18:23–35.)

A Brief Note on John 20:23

Although this paper focuses on the Synoptic Gospels, a brief mention of John 20:23 is proper here. Having breathed the Spirit over the disciples in the preceding verse, Jesus promises that ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἀφέωνται αὐτοῖς, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven to them." In the conditional clause, which is about human forgiveness, the evangelist mentions the patient but not the beneficiary. Moreover, the patient is ἁμαρτία. This construction is otherwise only used when God is the agent. As argued above, this syntax evokes the cognitive frame of forgiveness as removal of substance, which normally only God is able to effectuate. Many scholars have tried to avoid the theologically difficult conclusion that the Johannine community actually considered itself authorized to remove sin. In this scholarly discussion, a syntactical problem has been debated: Does the perfect tense of ἀφέωνται in the main clause mean that God's forgiveness comes first so that the community only consents, or does the just mentioned reasoning not apply in relation to conditional clauses?[71] The results of this paper add another syntactic argument to the discussion: The valence of the clause about human forgiveness fits perfectly into the substance-frame, which is usually only used when God is the

[71] E.g., the article by J. R. Mantey in *Journal of Biblical Literature* arguing for the former position, refuted by Henry J. Cadbury in the same issue. J. R. Mantey, "The Mistranslation of the Perfect Tense in John 20:23, Matt 16:19, and Matt 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 243–249; H. J. Cadbury, "The Meaning of John 20:23, Matthew 16:19, and Matthew 18:18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939): 251–254.

agent. The linguistic construction is therefore unique in early Christian literature. This indicates that the statement is precisely as theologically provocative as it seems to be.[72]

The Saying on Interpersonal Forgiveness in Mark 11:25

Mark 11:25 has a rare usage of ἀφίημι, with neither patient nor beneficiary. The same usage can be found once in *1 Clement* and twice in *Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians*:

> ἀφίετε εἴ τι ἔχετε κατά τινος, ἵνα καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφῇ ὑμῖν τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν. (Mark 11:25)
>
> ἀφίετε ἵνα ἀφεθῇ ὑμῖν (*1 Clem.* 13:2)
>
> ἀφίετε καὶ ἀφεθήσεται ὑμῖν (Pol. *Phil.* 2:3)
>
> εἰ οὖν δεόμεθα τοῦ κυρίου ἵνα ἡμῖν ἀφῇ, ὀφείλομεν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφιέναι (Pol. *Phil.* 6:2)

In all these passages, the usage of the verb with neither patient nor beneficiary is possible because its clause is paralleled by a clause that includes at least the beneficiary argument. That is, the parallel clause evokes the frame of sin as remission of debt. Moreover, the wider contexts of all these statements allow the reader to infer who the beneficiary is. This is a good example of where Danove's explanation (presented above) is very helpful: In the debt-frame, the patient may be omitted and inferred from general expectations (indefinite null complement) and the beneficiary may be omitted if given by the context (definite null complement).[73]

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[72] Cf. the scholarly discussion about whether God or a human community member is the agent in 1 John 5:16, δώσει αὐτῷ ζωήν. I have argued that the agent is a human intermediary of divine forgiveness in R. Roitto, "Practices of Confession, Intercession and Forgiveness in 1 John 1.9; 5.16," *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012): 232–253; also in this volume.

[73] Mark 11:25 is more problematic to analyse than the other passages, since the phrase εἴ τις sometimes functions as an equivalent to the relative pronoun ὅστις in Hellenistic Greek (BDF §376). That is, εἴ τι ἔχετε κατά τινος, could be said to fulfil a semantic function which is equivalent to the patient argument. Should we argue that Mark 11:25a is a clause about interpersonal forgiveness with a patient argument but no beneficiary argument, similar to the exception in John 20:23 (discussed above)? I think not. Rather, as Mark wanted to clarify what should be forgiven in a clause about interpersonal forgiveness, it seems like his linguistic intuitions told him that he should not use ἀφίημι with a direct object but rather find an alternative turn of phrase, and for that purpose the phrase εἴ τις does the trick.

The Story of the Sinful Woman in Luke 7:36–50

The story of the sinful woman who throws herself at Jesus' feet and receives forgiveness appears only in Luke (7:36–50). In vv. 47–48, ἀφίημι is used in a way that goes back and forth between the substance-frame and the debt-frame. Could this passage possibly undermine the argument of this paper? On the contrary, at closer inspection it is the other way around.

The ending of the story is confusing. In the dialogue between Jesus and Simon, the point is that forgiveness causes a response of love (7:40–46). Then the causal connection is reversed, so that love merits forgiveness (7:47a); then back again to the idea that forgiveness causes love (7:47b); then a final reversal of the causality when Jesus seems to affirm that the woman's acts of love together with her faith has merited forgiveness (7:48–50). This confusion about what causes what has led to a mountain of interpretations, and quite a few scholars conclude that the Lukan text intertwines different traditions without fully smoothing out the tensions.[74]

I have no intention to solve the problem here, but if we concentrate on how ἀφίημι is used, we find an interesting contribution to this scholarly debate, which also at the same time might explain why Luke mixes two different ways of talking about forgiveness. In the dialogue, where forgiveness causes love, the text evokes the debt-frame (ἀμφοτέροις ἐχαρίσατο, 7:42; ᾧ τὸ πλεῖον ἐχαρίσατο, 7:43). The verb χαρίζομαι is used here rather than ἀφίημι, probably because the parable that Jesus tells is about real monetary debt.[75] In 7:47a, where love causes forgiveness, the text uses ἀφίημι with a syntax that evokes the substance frame (ἀφέωνται αἱ ἁμαρτίαι αὐτῆς αἱ πολλαι). Then, in 7:47b, which returns to the idea that forgiveness causes love, he also returns to the syntax typical of the debt-frame (ᾧ δὲ ὀλίγον ἀφίεται). Finally, in 7:48–50, where the text seems to return to the idea that acts of love causes forgiveness, the syntax of forgiveness changes again to that typical of the substance-frame (ἀφέωνταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, 7:48; ἁμαρτίας ἀφίησιν, 7:49). That is, the idea that love causes forgiveness is consistently paired with the substance-frame of forgiveness, but the idea that forgiveness causes love is consistently paired with the debt-frame of forgiveness. This gives reason to suggest that Luke does indeed intertwine material from at least two sources. When Luke attempts dialectic inte-

[74] For overviews of the discussion, see e.g., J. Delobel, "Lk 7,47 in its Context: An Old Crux Revisited," in *The Four Gospels 1992. Festschrift for Frans Neirynck* (ed. F. van Segbroeck et al.; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 1581–1590; Hägerland, *Jesus*, 51–59; J. J. Kilgallen, "Forgiveness of Sins (Luke 7:36–50)," *Novum Testamentum* 40 (1998): 105–116.

[75] Luke-Acts does not use χαρίζομαι anywhere else in discourse about forgiveness.

gration of two understandings of the relation between love and forgiveness, he also intertwines two different linguistic constructions for forgiveness.

Conclusion

When early Christians used ἀφίημι in discourse about forgiveness, they used not one but two different linguistic constructions, which evoked distinct semantic and syntactic expectations. In one construction, removal of substance is the conceptual metaphor upon which forgiveness is modelled. To forgive is to remove the substance of sin. Only God can be the agent. The expected valence is two arguments, agent and patient. A full description of this construction is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3. **Construction: "A divine agent <u>sends away/forgives</u> the substance of sin"**

Head lexeme: ἀφίημι

Semantic frame elements	#1 The sender, who takes away sin. Restriction: The sender must be divine. #2 The substance of sin. #3 The person burdened/stained by sin.	
Valence	#1 Agent	Nominative case in active voice. The agent should be omitted in the passive voice.
	#2 Patient	Accusative case in the active voice. Nominative case in the passive voice. The patient may not be omitted and is always ἁμαρτία.

In the other construction, remission of debt is the conceptual metaphor upon which forgiveness is modelled. To forgive is to remit the debt of sin. Both God and humans can be the forgiving agent, but when humans forgive, the patient should be left unmentioned. A full description of this construction is shown in figure 4.

Figure 4. **Construction: "A benefactor <u>remits/forgives</u> the debt of sin to a sinner"**

Head lexeme: ἀφίημι

Semantic frame elements	#1 The benefactor.	Restriction: The benefactor may be either human or divine, but in the passive voice only divine.
	#2 The debt of sin.	
	#3 The debtor/sinner for whom #2 is forgiven.	
Valence	#1 Agent	Nominative case in active voice. The agent should be omitted in the passive voice.
	#2 Patient	Accusative case in active voice. Nominative case in the passive voice. The patient may be omitted (indefinite null complement) and should be omitted if the agent is human.
	#3 Beneficiary.	Dative case. The beneficiary may be omitted if two conditions apply: a) the context indicates who it is (definite null complement), and b) the patient is omitted.

The peculiar syntactic properties of ἀφίημι thus reflect the complexity of the early Christian imagination of forgiveness and sin. Only God had the power remove the substance of sin, but humans both could and should forgive the moral debt of those who wronged them, just like God. That is, God's benevolence rather than God's power patterned interpersonal forgiveness. More controversial is whether the linguistic observations of this paper can be used to argue that God's power to forgive the substance of sin was considered to be extended to the church in the in Johannine and Matthean tradition (John 20:23; Matt 9:8), but the results of our attention to verb valence support this interpretation.

Forgiveness, Rituals, and Social Identity in Matthew: Obliging Forgiveness

Introduction

Forgiveness permeates the Gospel of Matthew in several intermingling ways: The meaning of the Christ-event is interpreted as effecting divine forgiveness of sins more clearly than in any other Gospel (1:21; 20:28; 26:28). The ethics of interpersonal forgiveness is emphasized more strongly than in any other New Testament text (6:12, 14–15; 18:15–35; cf. 5:23–25, 38–39, 43–44). The integration between divine and interpersonal forgiveness is developed in several passages, in a way unique to Matthew (6: 12, 14–15; 9:8; 18:18–19, 23–35). Several ritual practices reflected in the text deal with forgiveness, one way or another (daily prayer, 6:9–15; intercessory prayer, 18:18–20; the Eucharist, 26:26–28). We may therefore assume that forgiveness was a central aspect of how the Matthean community[1] was perceived to be meaningful for its members. The question of this chapter is therefore not if but how forgiveness is integral to how Matthew depicts the social identity of the community of Jesus-followers.

Excursus

Although Matthew's geographical location, social position, and exact relation to other forms of Judaism is important to our understanding of the identity of the Matthean community, it suffices for the purpose of this chapter to briefly state the basic assumptions I make on these issues. On geographic location, my argument is not dependent on whether the Matthean community was situated somewhere in Syria, for instance

[1] I agree with Robert K. McIver that even if Richard Bauckham is right that the Gospel of Matthew was written for an audience beyond the Matthean community, it does not follow that the social situation of the Matthean community, that is, the community to which the authors of the Gospel of Matthew belonged, has not formed the interests and worries of the Matthean redaction. R. Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–48; R. K. McIver, *Mainstream or Marginal? The Matthean Community in Early Christianity* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 41–50.

> Antioch,[2] or Galilee, for instance Sepphoris,[3] or elsewhere. In any case, the Gospel was most probably produced in an urban area.[4] Regarding social position, I agree with those who suggest that at least the scribes who wrote Matthew were educated scribes and belonged to the retainer class, while the majority of the members of the Matthean community were probably non-elite.[5] The delicate debate about what would be the most proper way to describe Matthew's relation to Judaism cannot be rehearsed here. For our purposes it is enough to agree with the broad consensus that Matthew is written by a group that considers itself Jewish and writes in debate with another form of Judaism which Matthew names "Pharisees" (e.g., 3:7; 5:17–20; 10:43; 23:14–15). Whether we should describe Matthew as in a process of breaking with Judaism,[6] polemizing within Judaism,[7] or even polemizing within Pharisaic Judaism,[8] is of less importance for our problem. The important point for our purposes is that Matthew defines the Matthean identity by contrasting it with another form of Judaism. In social identity theory, this is called "the meta-contrast principle," a well-tested hypothesis suggesting that groups tend to maximize the experience that their group is meaningful by defining their identity in a way that maximizes the perceived contrast with relevant outgroups.[9]

To understand how Matthew sees the role of forgiveness in the identity of the Matthean community, we will use the methodology that I developed in my dissertation on Ephesians, where I interacted with different strands of social psychology, particularly the social identity perspective.[10] There I suggested that a group's

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[2] E.g., D. C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 53–62.

[3] E.g., A. M. Gale, *Redefining Ancient Borders: The Jewish Scribal Framework of Matthew's Gospel* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 41–63.

[4] Gale, *Redefining*, 41–6; McIver, *Mainstream or Marginal?* 33–35.

[5] E.g., E. J. Vledder and A. Van Aarde, "The Social Stratification of the Matthean Community," *Neot* 28 (1994): 511–522.

[6] G. N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 124–31.

[7] A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[8] A. Runesson, "Behind the Gospel of Matthew: Radical Pharisees in Post-War Galilee?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010): 460–471.

[9] E.g., P. J. Oakes, "The Categorization Process: Cognition of the Group in the Social Psychology of Stereotyping," in *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* (ed. D. Abrams, and M. A. Hogg; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 28–47; S. A. Haslam, J. C. Turner, P. J. Oakes, C. McGarty and K. J. Reynolds, "The Group as a Basis for Emergent Stereotype Consensus," *European Review of Social Psychology* 8 (1998): 203–239.

[10] R. Roitto, *Behaving as a Christ-Believer: A Cognitive Perspective on Identity and Behavior Norms in Ephesians* (ConBNT 46; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011). I have also applied this model to 1 John in R. Roitto, "Sinless Sinners who Remain in Him: Social Identity in 1 John," in *The T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity and the New Testament* (ed. B. Tucker and C. Baker; London: T&T Clark, 2013), 493–510.

(more or less) shared cognition about their social identity typically has the following components:

1. an identity narrative, containing the narrative rationale of the group,
2. an understanding of the group's relations to relevant outgroups, and
3. an identity prototype, consisting of
    a. attributes, that is the character traits of the ideal group member, which cause, or should cause,
    b. behaviours, that is, the practical, visible, manifestation of the group's identity.

To my previous model, I would like to add one more component:

4. a set of rituals that function to manifest the just mentioned aspects of social identity.

That is, I consider rituals an integral and indispensable part of Matthew's social identity.

Forgiveness and the Narrative Rationale of the Group

For a group to experience itself as meaningful, it needs to have an identity narrative, that is, a narrative rationale describing its origin and goal, its relation to other groups, its purpose, et cetera, in a way that motivates why the group is important and why it has its characteristics.[11]

One possible approach to determining the identity narrative of the Matthean community is to analyse the narrative plot of the Gospel. Mark Powell, for example, concludes from his narrative analysis of Matthew that the overarching plot of Matthew is God's conflict with Satan in his attempt to save his people from their sin, and that within that plot the opposition from the elite and the development of the disciples' relation to Jesus are subplots.[12] Powell's analysis is agreeable, but we should not confuse the plot of the Gospel text with the narrative identity of the Matthean community. The two do of course overlap, since – as Ulrich Luz rightly argues – the drama of Matthew is not only history-writing but also symbolically

[11] D. Bar-Tal, *Group Beliefs: A Conception for Analyzing Group Structure, Processes, and Behavior* (Springer Series in Social Psychology; Berlin: Springer, 1990); idem, "Group Beliefs as an Expression of Social Identity," in *Social Identity: International Perspectives* (ed. S. Worchel et al.; London: SAGE, 1998), 93–113.

[12] M. A. Powell, "The Plot and Subplots of Matthew's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 187–204.

reflects the self-understanding of the Matthean community.[13] Nevertheless, the Matthean community is not a character in the plot of the Gospel.

Petri Luomanen uses a combination of insights from narratology, redaction criticism, and social sciences in his study on Matthew's understanding of salvation.[14] His method, I think, has proved to be an excellent way to grasp the narrative identity of the Matthean community. After a thorough analysis of Matthew's redactional activity and the narrative plot of Matthew, he is able to summarize what he calls "Matthew's basic convictions regarding salvation," which we may call the narrative rationale of the Matthean community:

> The implied starting point is (1) God's election, which grants Israel its favoured position among the nations. Although (2) Israel has fallen, God keeps to his covenantal mercy and (3) calls his people through John the Baptist, Jesus (and even through the disciples) just as he has called them through his prophets in the OT. The people, however, (4) reject Jesus, which results in their (5) replacement by a new people of God. This new people of God can be entered (6) through baptism, which is understood mainly as an act of repentance and as a total commitment to God's will, as it is set forth in Jesus' teaching. (7) For those who enter this new 'covenantal' community, salvation is present reality which can be (8) maintained by wholehearted commitment to God's will and by repentance in the case of transgression. Only those who remain faithful in their righteousness until the end will pass the final judgement and enter the kingdom of the Father.[15]

That is, the narrative rationale of the Matthean community is that they are the community of those who a) are saved in the present, b) do God's will, c) stand a chance to be saved in the final judgment. This salvation is programmatically stated as salvation from sin in the introduction to the Gospel. "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21).

I agree with Luomanen's overall narrative. We should note, however, that some of his formulations touch on much debated issues in research on Matthew. Some scholars would not agree with Luomanen that grace and work stand side by side in the process of remaining in the covenant. Charles Talbert, for instance, argues that the indicative of grace governs the imperative of works in Matthew.[16] Willi Marxsen, on the other hand, argues that Matthew is a legalist who gives prior-

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[13] U. Luz, "The Disciples in the Gospel According to Matthew," in *The Interpretation of Matthew* (ed. G. Stanton, London: SPCK, 1983), 98–128.

[14] P. Luomanen, *Entering the Kingdom of Heaven: A Study on the Structure of Matthew's View of Salvation* (WUNT 2:101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998).

[15] Luomanen, *Entering*, 281.

[16] C. H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Paideia; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 9–27.

ity to works over grace.[17] Further, Luomanen's formulation that Matthew has a "new" covenant in mind is based on his conviction that the Matthean community has begun to separate itself from other forms of Judaism.[18] As noted above, scholars disagree on how intra-Jewish Matthew should be considered.

For our analysis of how Matthew understands forgiveness as a part of the Matthean identity, Luomanen's analysis has an important implication: according to Luomanen, Matthew's imagination has a covenantal structure. That is, it is structurally similar to what E. P. Sanders' calls "covenantal nomism,"[19] where forgiveness ("grace," in Sanders' terminology) is obtained continuously by staying in the covenant community. Therefore, divine forgiveness is not primarily given at the moment of entrance into the community but by continuously being in the community, according to Matthew's covenantal narrative.

Matthew does not interpret the baptism commanded by Jesus as a ritual that effects forgiveness. Rather, the meaning of baptism is an initiation into discipleship. "Make all nations disciples, by baptizing them ... and teaching them ..." (μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς ... διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς ... , Matt 28:19–20). In Luke-Acts, repentance (Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:13; 8:22; 26:18), faith in Christ (Luke 7:36–50; Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) and baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16) are repeatedly said to effect the forgiveness of sins. Similarly, Paul argues that faith (e.g., Rom 4:23–25; 10:9–10) and baptism (e.g., Rom 6:1–10) are the human responses which allow the believer to partake in the redemption from the power of sin that Christ has achieved through his death and resurrection. As opposed to Paul and Luke, for whom the decisive moment of forgiveness is the entrance into the community of faith, Matthew does not associate entrance itself with forgiveness at all. Indeed, Matthew even cuts out Mark's claim that John's baptism was "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 3:2 // Mark 1:4–5). Matthew's redactional activity could be seen as an attempt to take away the authority to forgive sins from John the Baptist.[20] A better interpretation, however, is that Matthew simply does not think that baptism, neither John's nor Christ's, effects forgiveness.[21] If so,

[17] W. Marxsen, *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 231–48.

[18] Luomanen, *Entering*, 265–66.

[19] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977). See p. 422 for a summary.

[20] W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew,* vol. 1: *Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I–VII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 292.

[21] Luomanen, *Entering*, 204–209.

Matthew would agree with the majority of Jews in the first century, who assumed that immersion rites could not effect forgiveness of sins, but only ritual purification.[22] However, Matthew does not associate baptism with ritual purity either. The only meanings attached to baptism are repentance (3:6) and discipleship (28:19–20).

Rather, forgiveness is an aspect of the continuous life of the Matthean community. Forgiveness is part of the Lord's Prayer (6:9–13), which the *Didache* (8:2–3) gives us reason to think was a daily prayer. Mediation of divine forgiveness through intercession is part of the authority granted to the community (9:8; 18:18–20). Finally, Jesus' covenant "for the forgiveness" of sin was manifested regularly in the Matthean Eucharist (26:28). When Sanders contrasts Pauline theology with the "covenantal nomism" typical of Second Temple Judaism, he argues that it is precisely on the issue of when grace is granted that Paul differs from most forms of Judaism. For Paul, justification (he does not use the word "forgiveness") is granted at the moment of entrance into Christ, but in covenantal nomism, grace is continuously granted for those who repent and atone for their sins.[23] As Luomanen points out, Matthew is here typical for second temple Judaism when he narrates the place of forgiveness in the continuous life of the community rather than at the entrance into the community.[24]

Forgiveness and Contrast to Outgroups

Social identity theory argues that social groups tend to define their own identity as maximally distinct from relevant outgroups.[25] This tendency is called "the metacontrast principle." Therefore, if divine forgiveness is central to the Matthean self-conception, we might suspect that Matthew contrasts the Matthean community with "the Pharisees" on this issue. This is for instance the case in Ephesians, where it is a central aspect of the community's self-understanding that they, who used to be sinful gentiles, have received atonement and thus salvation, as opposed to those who do not believe (Eph 1:7; 2:1–19). However, Matthew does not contrast the forgiveness available in community with lack of divine forgiveness for the Pharisees. Rather, Matthew almost seems to contradict the forgiving function of Jesus'

[22] T. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (Corrected reprint ed.; ConBNT 38; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 232–243.

[23] Sanders, *Paul*, e.g., 543–549.

[24] Luomanen, *Entering*, 278–281.

[25] References in note 9.

death in some of the warnings about what will happen at the final judgment. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21, cf. 25:31–46). As David Seeley argues, salvation by works and Jesus as the salvation from sin stand side by side in Matthew, but at points seem poorly integrated.[26] The judgment scene in Matthew 25:31–46 depicts the judgment of all humanity, and being a member of Jesus' covenant for the forgiveness of sins does not merit special favour.

If there is anything that the Gospel of Matthew contrasts with the competing outgroup, the Pharisees, it is not superior forgiveness, but superior righteousness. "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20). Superior ability to interpret the Torah and do God's will is the landmark of the (ideal) Matthean community, which distinguishes it from "the Pharisees" (e.g., 5:17–48; 12:1–14; 15:1–20; 16:5–12; 19:3–9; 23:1–39). An emphasis on superior access to forgiveness, which implies sinful community members in need of forgiveness, was perhaps felt to undermine the self-perception of the Matthean community as more righteous than other forms of Judaism. Perhaps the oft-noted oscillation between grace and perfectionism in Matthew can be understood as the tension between two socio-cognitive needs in the Matthean community, a) a meaningful identity narrative, and b) a sharp meta-contrast between the community and competing outgroups.

If superior commitment to God's will is Matthew's foremost source of collective self-esteem,[27] then we can understand why the ethics of forgiveness is emphasized in longer and more elaborate passages than the promise of divine forgiveness is, in spite of divine forgiveness being central to Matthew's Christology. Although the very meaning of Jesus' birth and death is to inaugurate a covenant that saves from sin (1:21; 20:28; 26:28), this is not what comes into the forefront in passages that accentuate the identity of the community in contrast to other groups. Rather, when the Lord's prayer is introduced as an instruction on how to pray differently from "the hypocrites" (6:5), the prayer about forgiveness (6:12) is clarified with a threat that puts the moral obligation in the forefront: "If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:15). Divine forgiveness is by

[26] D. Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 21–52.

[27] According to the self-esteem hypothesis in social identity theory, groups are motivated to interpret their social reality so that it allows them to feel self-esteem, see H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Conflict* (ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel; Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.

all means a central aspect of the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's theological narrative, but it comes attached with the demand to exercise superior morality.

In a preceding section of the Sermon on the Mount, 5:38–48, Jesus demands a moral practice of radical non-retaliation. (Although, the word "forgive" is not used in these verses, interpersonal non-retaliation and interpersonal forgiveness arguably overlap considerably.) This morality, too, is motivated with identity arguments. Non-retaliation and love of enemies are motivated with the argument that this is characteristic of those who belong to the community. It makes them "children of your Father in heaven" (5:45) and "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48), in contrast to "tax collectors" (5:46) and "gentiles" (5:47). Later in the Gospel, the parable about the unforgiving servant provides an antitype for the behaviour expected of a prototypical group member (18:23–35).

In short, divine forgiveness is foundational to the Matthean identity narrative, but when the identity of the community is contrasted with other groups it is superior morality, including the practice of interpersonal forgiveness, that makes the community distinct. This is understandable if we assume that Matthew was written in a situation where the Matthean community competed with other forms of Judaism about who has the most valid interpretation of Jewish piety.

The Imagination of Sin in Matthew

In order to grasp of how practices of forgiveness formed the identity of the Matthean community, we need to ask what Matthew means by sin. Gary Anderson has argued with the help of conceptual metaphor theory that in pre-exilic Jewish texts sin is mainly conceptualized as a substance, either a burden or a stain, which is removed through forgiveness, but in post-exilic texts this imagination is replaced by the imagination that sin is like a monetary debt and forgiveness remission of debt.[28] His analysis is an important methodological advance in our understanding of Ancient Jewish and Christian conceptions of sin. However, I have argued that a more proper understanding of early Christian forgiveness is that the debt-metaphor did not outcompete the substance-metaphor; sin was sometimes conceptualized as substance and sometimes as debt.[29]

Matthew imagines sin both as morally defiling substance and as monetary debt: in the Lord's prayer, the petition for forgiveness is unmistakably based on

[28] G. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

[29] R. Roitto, "The Polyvalence of ἀφίημι and the Two Cognitive Frames of Forgiveness in the Synoptic Gospels," *Novum Testamentum* 57 (2015): 136–158; also in this volume.

sin as debt. "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (6:12). Nathan Eubank has thoroughly investigated how monetary metaphors permeate Matthew and shown that several passages presuppose an imagination of sin as debt and moral deeds as treasure.[30] Good deeds are "treasures" (6:19–21; 19:21; cf. 13:44; 13:52) and will give a "wage" (5:12, 46; 6:1–18; 10:41–42; 16:27; 21:41). Jesus' death is a "ransom" (20:28). God's judgment will measure moral debt (5:25–26; 18:23–35; 25:13–30).

However, sin is also like a substance that causes moral impurity[31] in Matthew. "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (15:18). As Anders Runesson demonstrates, Matthew is deeply concerned with moral purity.[32] The Pharisees are accused of being clean on the outside but morally unclean on the inside (23:25–28). Immoral speech defiles (15:11, 18–20). The need to reconcile with a brother before sacrificing in the temple (5:23–24) implies purity logic; someone who is morally impure is not fit to participate in the cult. I have argued elsewhere that the story of the forgiven and healed paralytic makes the most sense if sin is seen as a substance that can cause sickness, and we will return briefly to that story below.[33]

Both these imaginations of sin do in different ways evoke an imagination of sin as something negative and dangerous. Thomas Kazen has demonstrated how fruitful it can be to use contemporary research on emotions to reflect upon how the Torah evokes moral emotions,[34] and I will follow his lead and reflect briefly on what moral emotions the two different imaginations of sin might stimulate.

The imagination of sin as a debt evokes the imagination of moral imbalance. We humans have a deep-seated tendency to become angry when we perceive something as unfair, and as soon as anger is triggered, we feel that we have the moral

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[30] N. Eubank, *Wages of Cross-bearing and Debt of Sin: The Economy of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013).

[31] The exact nature of moral impurity in second temple Judaism is debated. For a recent review of the scholarly debate, see T. Kazen, "The Role of Disgust in Priestly Purity Law: Insights from Conceptual Metaphor and Blending Theories," *Journal of Law, Religion, and the State* 3 (2014): 62–92. Many scholars would argue that moral "impurity" was not experienced as a mere metaphor for moral guilt, but as something quite real.

[32] A. Runesson, "Purity, Holiness, and the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's Narrative World," in *Purity and Holiness in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Memory of Susan Haber* (ed. C. Ehrlich, A. Runesson and E. Schuller; WUNT 305; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 144–180.

[33] Roitto, "Polyvalence."

[34] T. Kazen, *Emotions in Biblical Law: A Cognitive Science Approach* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011); Kazen, "Role of Disgust."

mandate to act for justice.[35] Most probably, therefore, the imagination of being in moral debt to God evoked an anthropomorphic fear of God's anger.[36] In the parable about the ungrateful servant (18:23–35), sin is likened to a monetary debt. God is portrayed as a king who is first forgiving, but when the servant fails to forgive his servant, God's previous forgiving attitude is turned into anger (18:34), and in anger he punishes the debtor. Similarly, God is said to be angry when he executes judgment in other passages, too (3:7; 22:7). Yet other passages do not specifically mention the emotion of anger but portray God as someone punishes in what seems to be state of anger (7:23; 24:50–51; 25:26–28). In several passages that threaten with punishment monetary language is used (5:25–26; 18:34–35; 25:26–28). In short, when sin is a debt, it can easily evoke the imagination of God's just anger over this imbalance.

The imagination of sin as a defiling substance evokes intuitions about disgusting substances that we wish to avoid. The emotion of disgust originally evolved as an emotional response that helped us avoid bad food and sickness, but was gradually extended to also function as a moral emotion.[37] We can feel disgust for certain types of immorality, especially immoral actions that are perceived as violation of the sacred.[38] As Kazen shows, God is frequently portrayed as someone who is disgusted by human immorality in the Torah, and God's reaction to ritual impurity and immorality overlap considerably, as do the rituals to remedy sin and impurity.[39] Although God is never explicitly portrayed as disgusted by human immorality in Matthew, much of Matthew's language (discussed in the previous paragraph) is based on this imagination. Perhaps divine disgust is implied when "the king" (God) is provoked by a badly dressed wedding guest (22:11–12), in the expression "desolating sacrilege" (24:15), and in the assessment of a bad servant as "worthless" (25:30). If sin is perceived as a substance that makes us disgusting, this also

[35] E. Mullen and L. J. Skitka, "Exploring the Psychological Underpinnings of the Moral Mandate Effect: Motivated Reasoning, Group Differentiation, or Anger?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (2006): 629–643; D. T. Miller, "Disrespect and the Experience of Injustice," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 527–553.

[36] Cf. Kazen, *Emotions*, 115–140.

[37] P. Rozin, J. Haidt and C. R. McCauley, "Disgust," in *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd ed. (ed. M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones and L. F. Barrett; New York: Guildford, 2000), 737–753; V. Curtis, *Don't Look, Don't Touch: The Science Behind Revulsion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[38] P. Rozin, L. Lowery, S. Imada and J. Haidt, "The CAD Triad Hypothesis: A Mapping Between Three Moral Emotions (Contempt, Anger, Disgust) and Three Moral Codes (Community, Autonomy, Divinity)," *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 76 (1999): 574–586.

[39] Kazen, *Emotions*, 71–94; Kazen, "Role of Disgust."

makes it easy for us to imagine that there is a connection between sin and sickness, since we intuitively feel that disgusting things might make us sick.[40] This would then at least partially explain the widespread belief that there was a connection between sin and sickness, which seems to be taken for granted in the story about the forgiven paralytic (9:1–8).[41]

In short, sin as a moral debt is perceived as dangerous in Matthew because it evokes the imagination of God's righteous anger that might lead to punishment, and sin as a substance is perceived as dangerous because it evokes the imagination of God's moral disgust that might lead to rejection. These insights help us understand that the identity narrative that Jesus has come with "salvation from sin" (1:21) and instituted a "covenant ... for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28) was probably perceived as emotionally engaging and motivating by the Matthean community. It also helps us appreciate why liberation from sin is such a central aspect of the ritual life of the Matthean community.

Formation of Social Identity through Rituals of Divine Forgiveness

Divine forgiveness is important in three rituals depicted by Matthew, the Lord's prayer (6:9–13) intercessory prayers for sinners (18:18–20) and the Eucharist (26:26–28). How did these rituals contribute to the social identity of the Matthean community?

The Lord's Prayer

The Sermon on the Mount is organized so that the Lord's Prayer is placed right at the centre of it.[42] The prayer is formulated so that the petitioners ask God to act in relation to "us" rather than "me" and was therefore probably jointly recited in the communal gatherings. In the Didache (8:2–3), the community is exhorted to pray the Lord's prayer three times a day, so we may suspect that it was a daily prayer in the Matthean community, too. Thus, the Lord's Prayer (6:12) was most likely a central part of the communal life of the Matthean community.

The first three petitions in the prayer ask for the realization of Kingdom of Heaven, or the "rule" (βασιλεία) of Heaven, in different ways, and the last three

[40] P. Rozin, J. Haidt and C. R. McCauley, "Disgust."

[41] Cf. Roitto, "Polyvalence."

[42] U. Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 172–174.

ask for the concrete practical aspects of the realizations of that rule.[43] The Kingdom is realized when they have enough food, when they forgive and are forgiven, and when they are not led into trials.

Our focus here is the prayer for forgiveness in 6:12. With the words "debts" and "debtors," sin is cognitively modelled on monetary debt, and forgiveness is like remission of monetary debt. God is like an exceedingly generous debtor, a thought that is further developed in 18:23–35

Our first observation must be that since the community asked for divine forgiveness on a daily basis, divine forgiveness was continuous in Matthean community. (That is, it was not something that happened at the entrance into the community as discussed above.) Being forgiven on a daily basis was a central aspect of being part of the Kingdom of Heaven, the covenant in which there is forgiveness of sins (26:28; cf. the discussion on the Eucharist below).

More difficult to interpret is the inclusion of "as we forgive our debtors" after the petition for forgiveness. The clause stands out since none of the other petitions in the prayer contain formulations where the petitioners are agents. One popular interpretation of the phrase is that the petitioners acknowledge their duty to forgive in order to receive forgiveness.[44] Matthew's clarifying note right after the prayer that "if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (6:15; cf. 18:23–35) seemingly supports this interpretation.

This judicial, or legalistic, interpretation of how forgiveness works in Matthew has rightly been criticized for being potentially oppressive for those who might have good reason not to forgive powerful oppressors. If, for instance, battered wives are pressed to forgive their abusive husbands, it might lead to continued suffering.[45] The problem becomes even more accentuated in the light of all the threats of condemnation and judgment scenes in the Gospel of Matthew, where everyone who is anything less than morally perfect is judged (e.g., 5:20; 7:15–32, 25:31–46). A judicial or dogmatic interpretation of these passages would probably exclude all of humanity, including the Matthean community, from heaven. It is not very plausible that that the Matthean community entertained an interpretation of these passages that condemned more or less every community member. Rather, as several

[43] Cf. J. D. Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord's Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

[44] G. Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 121; Davies and Allison, *Matthew* 1:611.

[45] E. J. Ramshaw, "Power and Forgiveness in Matthew 18," *Word & World* 18 (1998): 397–404.

scholars have pointed out, it is important to understand that although these passages seemingly just inform about the future judgment, the pragmatic function of these passages is to exhort.[46] In terms of social identity theory, threats and judgment scenes is a way to express the identity prototype of the community and urge its members to strive for it. In the light of this reasoning, the pragmatic force of the claim that God only forgives those who forgive (6:14–15; 18:23–35) should be seen a) as a moral exhortation to forgive, and b) as a way to express that the ideal community member is someone who forgives. There is indeed a threat that those who do not forgive will not be forgiven in 6:14–15 (and 18:23–35), but this threat is meant as a warning and probably not as a rigid mechanistic rule for God's forgiving action.

Consequently, it is not very meaningful to interpret "as we forgive our debtors" in the Lord's prayer as a recognition of the conditions of divine forgiveness. Rather, I agree with Arland Hultgren that the pragmatic function of "as we forgive our debtors" is performative.[47] He suggests that the liturgical function of the phrase is "as we *hereby* forgive our debtors." That is, every time the prayer is performed, those who pray forgive those who have wronged them. Hultgren does not discuss the grammatical justification for this interpretation in his article, but we can add to his argument that "we forgive" is in the aorist tense (ἀφήκαμεν) and that the aorist can function to express "a state of mind just reached, or … an act expressive of it" (so called "dramatic aorist").[48]

A performative understanding of "as we forgive our debtors" would certainly have an important function within the ritual and social life of the Matthean community. As ritual theorist Roy Rappaport argues, what you do in a ritual sticks to you and becomes a social obligation, since you have performed it in the midst of your community.[49] Consequently, there would be social pressure to actually forgive others in a community that on a daily basis ritually performs interpersonal forgiveness in a shared prayer, especially if interpersonal forgiveness is seen as a prototypical action.

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[46] E.g., Luomanen, *Entering*, 190–93; S. Grindheim, "Ignorance Is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment according to Works in Matthew 25:31–46," *Novum Testamentum* 50 (2008): 313–331.

[47] A. Hultgren, "Forgive Us, as We Forgive (Matt 6:12)," *Word & World* 16 (1996): 284–290.

[48] E. DeWitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2008[1892]) §45.

[49] R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 119–125.

Intercessory Prayers for Sinners

Matthew 18, where the Matthean Jesus gives instructions for "the assembly/congregation" (ἡ ἐκκλησία, 18:17), is probably one of our most transparent windows into the Matthean community. A central portion of this community instruction deals with how to reintegrate erring community members (18:12–35). I have argued elsewhere that this passage reflects a practice for reintegrating wrongdoers in the community.[50] The practice consists of a) a reproof procedure (18:15–17) and b) a prayer ritual that "looses" the sinning "brother"[51] from sin (18:18–20). The procedure is preceded by a narrative about God's joy when a strayed sheep returns (18:12–14) and followed by a command to forgive sinning community members relentlessly, so that God will not stop forgiving (18:21–35). This framing of the practice clarifies that the goal of the community should always be to reintegrate the offender, and only marginalize him or her as a very last resort.

For this chapter, I focus on the ritual practice reflected in 18:18–20, where it is promised that whatever community members "bind" or "loose" (v. 18), whatever they pray for (v. 19), God will make it happen. The guarantee for this is the presence of Jesus when the community members gather in his name (v. 20). The presence of Jesus frames the whole Gospel (1:23; 28:20), and here his presence is the reason for why binding and loosing through prayer works. One might perhaps doubt the interpretation that 18:18–20 reflects a ritual practice in the Matthean community, since the verses are formulated as promises, not as ritual instructions. Admittedly, before the sayings in vv. 18–20 were put in their current literary context by the Matthean redactor, the promises may very well have been transmitted as disparate generally assuring sayings,[52] but when Matthew puts them in the context of Matthew 18 and binds vv. 15–20 together with repeated catchwords,[53] the sayings function as instructions. The greater part of the speech in chapter 18 (vv. 12–35) motivates and instructs on communal practices of reintegration and

[50] R. Roitto, "Reintegrative Shaming and a Prayer Ritual of Reintegration in Matthew 18:15–20," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 79 (2014): 95–123.

[51] The designation of a community members as a "brother" (ἀδελφός) is probably gender inclusive, see P. Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 16–67.

[52] Cf. U. Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 448–9; W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2: *Commentary on Matthew VIII–XVIII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 752, 781.

[53] Cf. W. G. Thompson, *Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community: Mt. 17,22–18,35* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970), 175–202.

forgiveness. The verses preceding vv. 18–20 (vv. 15–17) contain instructions for reproof and the following verses (vv. 21–22) consist of instructions for forgiveness. That is, the literary context of vv. 18–20 is communal instruction, which makes it reasonable to assume that Matthew uses existing saying traditions to give instructions on how to bind and loose through prayer in these verses.

There is no scholarly consensus about what it means to bind and loose.[54] Many commentators argue that binding and loosing in 18:18 is a judicial ruling of specific cases.[55] Other commentators argue, in my opinion rightly so, that loosing is not just a judicial decision, but an act of mediating divine forgiveness.[56] Given the multitude of possible interpretations of "bind" and "loose,"[57] I am of the opinion that the meaning of the terms in this particular verse is best understood in the light of the preceding and following verses.[58] Both the preceding and the following verses deal with the reintegration (vv. 12–17) and forgiveness (vv. 21–35) of people *who are guilty*. An interpretation of "loose" as declaration of innocence does therefore not fit the literary context. The interpretation that "loose" means liberation from sin, on the other hand, fits the context perfectly. This interpretation also fits Matthew's theology in the story about the forgiven and healed paralytic (9:1–8). In that passage, Matthew's special theological interest comes through in his redaction of Mark's story, where Matthew ends the story with the comment that "when the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority [to forgive sins] *to human beings*" (9:8; cf. Mark 2:12). This comment can reasonably be considered an expression of the self-perception of the Matthean community as authorized to mediate the forgiveness of sins.[59]

Matthew's intercessory ritual is well integrated with the social identity of the group. First, it is well integrated on the narrative level. According to Matthew's identity narrative, Jesus a) came to save from sin (1:21; 20:28; 26: 28), b) is present in the community with heavenly authority (18:19; 28:18–20) and, c) has given his

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[54] For an overview of scholarly suggestions, see R. H. Hiers, "'Binding' and 'Loosing': The Matthean Authorizations," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 233–250.

[55] E.g., Davies and Allison, *Matthew: Vol 2*, 787; C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 454–455; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 695.

[56] E.g., Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 454; R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 369.

[57] For an overview of possible interpretations, see R. H. Hiers, "'Binding' and 'Loosing'" 233–250.

[58] I have given a fuller argument for this interpretation in Roitto, "Reintegrative Shaming."

[59] Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:98.

own authority to the community (9:8; 10:1; 18:18–20). As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out, we humans tend to think that presence and proximity means influence.[60] An identity narrative about Jesus' presence does therefore induce the intuition of divine influence over the community. Second, it is well integrated with the identity prototype of the group. A prototypical group member a) is righteous, which includes being forgiven and a willingness to forgive (see discussion above and below), and b) has been given heavenly authority to mediate forgiveness (9:8; 18:18–20; cf. 10:1). The presence of Jesus and the gift of authority does not relate primarily to individuals but to the community. Therefore, an intercessory prayer for a sinning group member should be performed in the presence of at least "two or three" community members (18:18–20). Thus performed, it was most probably experienced as both effective and important for the identity of the community.

The practice of binding or loosing also fits well into Matthew's perception of sin as a dangerous substance (discussed above). Loosing a brother is a crisis ritual, which transforms the sinner from a negative state of being morally defiled by sin into a normalized state where s/he is no longer in danger.[61] Since the intercessory ritual was performed before at least a small portion of the community ("two or three," 18:19–20), perhaps even the whole community, the act informs the community that the transgressor is now to be treated as a fully acceptable member of the community.[62] A binding ritual, on the other hand, communicates to the community that the sinner has not listened to the reproof of the community (18:15–17), and should not be considered a good (prototypical) community member, but rather "a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17).

If the intercessory ritual had the power to transform the sinner's status in the community, the ritual had several important group dynamic functions. First, it helped the community to be able to think of itself as freed from sin. We can reasonably imagine that in spite of all emphasis on righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew, the social life of the Matthean community was hardly free from moral transgression. These transgressions would then have created a cognitive dissonance between ideal self-perception and lived reality that had to be resolved in order to maintain a positive experience of the identity of the community.[63] "Loosing" the

[60] G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 128.

[61] On crisis rituals, see J. P. Schjødt, "Initiation and the Classification of Rituals," *Temenos* 22 (1986): 93–108.

[62] Rappaport, *Ritual*, 52–54. Rappaport argues that rituals function to signal information in the community about the status of its participants.

[63] Cf. Roitto, *Behaving*, 118–120.

substance of sin from repentant community members fulfilled that function. Anders Runesson even suggests that the community felt the need to maintain the *collective* purity of the community in order to function as God's people.[64] I am a bit hesitant to go that far, though, because the idea that we find in for instance Leviticus 18:24–28 that God will collectively reject his people if they defile the land is not there in Matthew. Rather, God's rejection is always directed at the individual in the judgment scenes of Matthew (Matt 7:15–32, 25:31–46) and threats of collective rejection of the Matthean community are nowhere to be found. Nevertheless, if righteousness was an important aspect of the social identity prototype of the group, a ritual that could restore a sinning community member's status was of paramount importance to the collective self-perception of the group. Likewise, a binding ritual signalling that a group member should no longer be considered prototypical probably also had a function for the identity of the group as a last resort. As José Marques shows, groups can strengthen their social identity by labelling deviant group members as "black sheep," since labelling of deviants clarifies the borders and the prototype of the group.[65]

Second, as Roy Rappaport points out, many rituals reinforce "canonical information," that is, information about the world view of the group.[66] A ritual of intercession would not only reflect but also reinforce the identity narrative (discussed above) that the assembly is in Jesus' salvatory presence and thus given authority to mediate divine forgiveness.

The Eucharist

Although Matthew never explicitly writes "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24), his account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples most probably reflects a communal practice. Matthew's additions "Eat!" and "Drink from it, all of you!" to Mark's account of the last supper (Matt 26:26–28; Mark 14:14:22–24), are most probably liturgically motivated. For our discussion, we are interested in Matthew's addition of the words "for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 28) to Mark's account in order to clarify what the Eucharist is meant to celebrate.

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[64] Runesson, "Purity," 169–171.

[65] J. M. Marques, "The Black-Sheep Effect: Out-Group Homogeneity in Social Comparison Settings," in *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* (ed. D. Abrams and M. A. Hogg; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 131–151; J. M. Marques et al., "Social Categorization, Social Identification, and Rejection of Deviant Group Members," in *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes* (ed. M. A. Hogg and S. Tindale; Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 400–424.

[66] Rappaport, Ritual, 52–54.

From the perspective of ritual theory, a central analytical question is "What is the ritual believed to effect?" As we saw above in the analysis of Matt 18:18–20, for instance, intercessory prayers effect binding or loosing of sin. But does the Matthean account of the Eucharist really promise to effect anything? In later Christian texts, the ritual efficacy of the Eucharist is frequently described as transforming the participants and/or securing eternal life for the participants (e.g., John 6:51; Ignatius, *Ign. Eph.* 20:2; Justin Martyr, *1. Apol.* 66; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.2.2–3; Origen, *Cels.* 8.33). Matthew, however, does not really promise any direct ritual efficacy for the participants. (This goes for Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:17–20; 1 Cor 11:23–25; *Did.* 9–10, too.) Although the words "for the forgiveness of sins" in Matthew's account of the Eucharist are interpreted in many church traditions as promising forgiveness of sins to those who participate in the ritual, Matthew does not actually say that. Rather, the claim is that "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). That is, the Eucharist somehow relates to a covenant in which there is forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is thus said to come from participation in the covenant, and not directly from partaking in the Eucharist.

Exegetical commentaries on Matthew are usually careful to avoid claiming that the phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" refers to the direct efficacy on the individual participating in the Eucharist. However, the exact relation between the Eucharist and forgiveness is often quite vaguely stated. I exemplify with three standard commentaries. Donald Hagner elusively suggests that "the celebration of the sacrament brings a fresh experience of the grace of God through the forgiveness of sins, a renewed participation in salvation already enjoined."[67] Hagner could just mean that the Eucharist creates a subjective experience of forgiveness already given, but the phrase "through the forgiveness of sins" could also be interpreted as meaning that it is through the forgiveness administered in the Eucharist that the participant can experience God's grace. Nothing he writes in his previous analysis helps us understand what he means. William Davies and Dale Allison state that the participant in the Matthean Eucharist takes part "in the effects of Jesus' self-sacrifice."[68] They avoid saying whether the ritual is participation in the covenant or, more directly, in the forgiveness of sins that Jesus effects. However, based on their exegesis of v. 28 a few pages earlier I conjecture that they mean to say that the Eucharist is

[67] D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1995), 774.

[68] W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol 3: *Commentary on Matthew XIX–XXVIII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1997), 447.

a participation in the covenant, which is an interpretation I agree on.[69] Ulrich Luz, in his analysis of Matthew's account of the last supper, concludes that

> [the participants] share in the saving power of Jesus's death. That becomes most clear for the Matthean church in the experience and in the practice of the forgiveness of sins through which the saving power of Jesus becomes available to the church and in which it actively participates in that power.[70]

Luz's latter sentence is not easily exegeted, but I take him to mean that the Eucharist makes the community participate in the general domain of Jesus' salvation but does not directly effect forgiveness to sinning individuals. If so, I would agree.

The believed efficacy of participating in the Eucharist according to Matthew is not directly forgiveness of sins, but participation in the covenant established by Jesus' death, in which there is forgiveness of sins. That is, the Eucharist was not experienced as a crisis ritual that saved from an acute state of sin but as a calendric ritual that maintained the community's covenant with God who could forgive sins.[71] There are other rituals in Matthew that effect forgiveness for transgressors: daily and intercessory prayers for forgiveness (6:12; 18:18–20, discussed above), so yet another ritual to effect forgiveness for individual sins seems redundant.[72] The wording of Matt 26:28 is not that the cup effects forgiveness, but that the cup "is the blood of the covenant ... for the forgiveness of sins." Among both Jews and Greeks, ritualized dining before a god typically functioned to maintain good relations with the god.[73] The ritual elements of the dinner were meant to honour the god, not to effect specified favours from the god. It is therefore reasonable that the Matthean community imagined that there was a need for a communal meal that upheld a good relation between God and the community – a "covenant." If Luomanen is right that Matthew's idea of salvation fits structurally into Sanders' covenantal nomism – and I think he is – it would be appropriate for the Matthean community to have a ritual to celebrate and uphold that covenant.

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[69] Davies and Allison, *Matthew: Vol. 3*, 474–475.

[70] U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 384.

[71] On crisis rituals versus calendric rituals, see Schjødt, "Initiation."

[72] In the Didache, which probably stems from a version of Jewish-Christian faith similar to Matthew's, confessing sins and reconciling with brothers should be done before celebration of the Eucharist, in order to avoid profaning the meal (14:1–3). That is, being forgiven is a prerequisite for the meal, not an effect.

[73] E.g., D. E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003).

The Eucharist thus interpreted would have manifested the identity of Matthean community in several ways. First, the meal would have communicated "canonical information"[74] about the identity of the group. The meal expresses the narrative rationale of the community in a condensed manner: It is the community of those saved from sin in the presence of Jesus – those who belong to the covenant inaugurated by Jesus' death in which there is forgiveness of sins. (The community's identity as righteous would not be manifest in the Eucharist, though.) Second, on a practical level, celebrating a ritualized meal together would have strengthened the social bonds within the community. Third, each participant would signal "self-referential information,"[75] that is, information to the community about his/her commitment to the group, just by regular participation in the meal.

Interpersonal Forgiveness and Identity Formation

Matthew emphasizes interpersonal forgiveness more than any other Gospel. One cluster of forgiveness-related ethics appears in the Sermon on the Mount. There, forgiveness (6:12, 14–15), non-retaliation (5:38–48) and reconciliation (5:23–24) are absolute demands and no exceptions to the rule are mentioned. The ethics there is not intra-group ethics but universal ethics that should be exercised towards anyone, even "your enemy" (5:44). Another cluster of forgiveness-ethics appears in Matt 18, which deals with intra-communal norms. The most famous saying about forgiveness in this passage, "not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (18:22), is by itself unconditional, but is placed in a context of conditional forgiveness. In the preceding verses (18:15–20), we learn that every effort should be made to reintegrate a sinning brother, but if the offender "refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17). It seems, then, that the saying about relentless forgiveness in 18:21–22 applies to those who have listened to the reproof (18:15–17) and been loosed through intercessory prayer (18:18–20) and not to unrepentant community members (cf. Luke 17:3–4).

In the light of research on how humans tend to forgive, it is quite surprising that Matthew's ethics of forgiveness is more restrictive towards group members than towards outsiders. Cognitive research on forgiveness shows that most people are more willing to forgive those who are close to them and game-theoretical simulations of forgiveness demonstrate that it is rational to be much more forgiving

[74] See discussion at n. 66.

[75] Rappaport, *Ritual*, 52–54.

to established cooperation-partners than to strangers.[76] With only a few exceptions, most people in antiquity shared these ideals.[77] Being forgiving towards outsiders could make you look like a fool that could not defend your honour.[78] Forgiveness and lenience within the family, on the other hand, was considered good.[79] In short, Matthew's ethics of forgiveness appears to be counterintuitive, irrational, and countercultural. However, we may ask whether the ethics of forgiveness in Matthew contributed to the identity of the community.

Forgiveness and Non-retaliation Towards Outsiders

As irrational as unconditional forgiveness and non-revenge towards outsiders may appear, it still seems to have been an important part of the social identity of the Matthean community. This is especially patent in Matt 5:38–48, where non-revenge and love of enemies are motivated with the argument that it is their identity. The motivation given is simply: "... so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (5:45) and "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48). This kind of thinking, where we assign certain actions as the logical consequence or duty of someone's social identity is quite typical for human psychology,[80] and I have given examples elsewhere that this was no less common in the first century Mediterranean than it is today.[81]

Quite naturally, an attitude of forgiving, non-retaliation, and love of enemies, would have prevented the Matthean community to become an "introversionist" community, like for instance the Qumranites, but inspired the community to

[76] E.g., É. Mullet and G. Michèle, "Developmental and Cognitive Points of View on Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research and Practice* (ed. M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament and C. E. Thoresen; New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 111–132; M. Hartshorn, A. Kaznatcheev and T. Shultz, "The Evolutionary Dominance of Ethnocentric Cooperation," *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation* 16 (2013): 7.

[77] M. Reiser, "Love of Enemies in the Context of Antiquity," *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001): 411–427.

[78] J. H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 190–211.

[79] D. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Growe, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2001), 171–173.

[80] M. Hewstone, *Causal Attribution: From Cognitive Processes to Collective Beliefs* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); M. Augoustinos, M. I. Walker and N. Donaghue, *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 69–71, 225–270.

[81] Roitto, *Behaving*, 74–106.

remain in interaction with the rest of society as a "conversionist" community.[82] Matthew's Jesus even states that one reason for doing good deeds is to advertise the movement: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16). But if outsiders would have found the ethics of forgiveness and love of enemies in Matthew foolish, as Jerome Neyrey argues,[83] one could argue that the strategy would have been bad advertisement for the community.

Here, sociologist Wolfgang Lipp's theory about self-stigmatizing leadership is illuminating.[84] According to Lipp, groups or individuals who wilfully and strategically act contrary to prevailing societal norms can sometimes challenge cultural beliefs about what should be considered normal societal order and even win people over to their side. Helmut Mödritzer employs Lipp's theory in New Testament studies; he gives several examples of this self-stigmatizing strategy in the first century and then applies it to John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul.[85]

We can apply the idea of self-stigmatizing leadership to Matthew's interpretation of Jesus' ethics of relentless forgiveness and non-retaliation, too. Self-stigmatizing behaviour would probably have been one of the few viable strategies left for the Matthean community, if it was in the process of being marginalized by other Jews. Leviticus instructs that "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin ... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19:17–18). The ethics of non-retaliation and love of enemy in Matt 5:38–48 could be said to take this covenantal ethics to a shocking, self-stigmatizing, extreme, that could perhaps subvert existing social orders. We should be under no illusion that the whole Matthean community practised this ethics unanimously, but to the extent they did, perhaps the Matthean community had some success in redefining the situation through self-stigmatizing behaviour, and thus in convincing at least some other Jews about the superiority of their ways.

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[82] The terms "introversionist sect" and "conversionist sect" are suggested by R. B. Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). I prefer the word "community" over "sect" here, to avoid confusion about the many different definitions of "sect" among scholars.

[83] Neyrey, *Honor*, 190–211.

[84] W. Lipp, *Stigma und Charisma: über soziales Grenzverhalten* (Berlin: Reimer, 1985).

[85] H. Mödritzer, *Stigma und Charisma im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt: zur Soziologie des Urchristentums* (Freiburg: Univ.-Verl., 1994).

Intra-group Forgiveness

The ethics of forgiveness in Matthew 18 is quite reasonable compared to its counterpart in the Sermon on the Mount. As discussed above, it is usually strategic to be very forgiving towards members of your ingroup and only stop forgiving in really hopeless cases. In Matthew 18, the community is urged to forgive relentlessly (18:21–22) with the sole exception of those who refuse to change their way even after a thorough process of reproof (18:15–17). The possibility of exclusion or marginalization of community members (18:17) is carefully embedded in a literary context of God's care for the sinner (18:12–14), a soft reintegrative reproof practice (18:15–17) and forceful exhortation to never grow tired of forgiving brothers (18:20–35). Compared to many other early Christian texts (Rom 16:17; 1 Cor 5:9–11; Eph 5:7; 2 Thess 3:6, 14; Tit 3:6; Did 15:3), Matthew's advice to the community appears quite lenient. Matthew's Jesus commands that the community should go to extraordinary length in its reproof before it marginalizes transgressors. We may therefore suspect that Matthew 18 was formulated as a reaction against a tendency to exclude people from the community too eagerly.[86] If the Matthean community was under social pressure from the surrounding society, we may suspect that the community felt a particularly strong need to maintain a self-perception as morally superior (cf. 5:20). In such situations, groups tend to be more eager than otherwise to exclude the "black sheep" from the community to reduce the discrepancy between ideal and reality.[87] If the eagerness to exclude went too far, this might have impaired the social climate in the community. Such a situation could explain the composition of Matt 18.

Integration of Divine and Interpersonal Forgiveness

Matthew integrates the ethics of interpersonal forgiveness with God's forgiveness in several ways, all of which contribute to the identity of the Matthean community. Interpersonal forgiveness is described as analogous to God's forgiveness in the Lord's prayers. "Forgive us … as (ὡς) we forgive" (6:12). Elsewhere Matthew expresses the idea that being a child of God (that is, an ideal community member) means to act in a non-retaliatory manner inspired by God's benevolence (5:45). A forgiving prototypical group member is thus inspired by God's forgiving behaviour.

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[86] For my full argument, see Roitto, "Reintegrative Shaming."

[87] See discussion at n. 65.

Divine forgiveness is also said to be causally dependent on interpersonal forgiveness (5:13–14; 18:34–35). However, the threat that one might not be forgiven if one does not forgive is mainly meant to function as an exhortation to forgive, as I argued in the discussion on the Lord's prayer. Nevertheless, by associating interpersonal forgiveness with the last judgment, it becomes integrated with the larger identity narrative: The hope of the community is, to quote Luomanen, that "those who remain faithful in their righteousness until the end will pass the final judgement."[88]

Interpersonal forgiveness is also presented as the proper response to divine forgiveness in the covenant inaugurated by Jesus. The Lord's prayer (5:9–13) is a prayer for the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven. By including a ritualized performance of interpersonal forgiveness as a response to God's forgiveness in the Lord's prayer (6:12b), interpersonal forgiveness becomes an essential part of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the parable of the ungrateful servant, the ungrateful servant does not understand that the proper response to God's great gift of forgiveness is interpersonal forgiveness (18:23–35). That is, the servant is a community member who does not understand the obligations that fall on those who wish to be part of the covenant "for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28). Just like the Sinai Covenant contained both divine and human obligations, so does the covenant inaugurated by Jesus. Interpersonal forgiveness is therefore not only a general ethical principle, but an expression of the identity narrative that the community partakes in the covenant for the forgiveness of sins.

In short, interpersonal forgiveness 1) is analogous to God's forgiveness, 2) is a condition for divine forgiveness in the final judgment (though we must remember the hortatory function of this conditionality), and 3) is a covenantal duty in the covenant "for the [divine] forgiveness of sins." All these ways of integrating divine and human forgiveness contribute in different ways to the experience that interpersonal forgiveness is central to the identity of the Matthean community.

Summary

In Matthew, divine and interpersonal forgiveness are well integrated aspects of the social identity of the Matthean community. According to the identity narrative of the Matthean community, they are those who belong to the covenant for the forgiveness of sins and who should respond to God's forgiveness by righteous exercise of interpersonal forgiveness in order to remain in the covenant. Forgiveness should

[88] Luomanen, *Entering*, 281.

be practiced in their everyday interaction with outsiders and each other. That is, it was considered prototypical for a community member to be excessively forgiving. Ritually, there were several ways to express this identity as forgiven and forgiving. On a daily basis, the Lord's Prayer expressed a petition for forgiveness and simultaneously performed forgiveness towards others; the Eucharist functioned as a calendric ritual to maintain the covenant of forgiveness; and intercessory prayers functioned as a crisis ritual to loosen sinning community members from the danger of sin.

Practices of Confession, Intercession and Forgiveness in 1 John 1:9; 5:16

Abstract

1 John 1:9 and 5:16 reflect practices of public confession of sins, intercession, and mediation of God's forgiveness. Divine forgiveness and belonging to the community were integrated in the Johannine community to the extent that one equalled the other. Therefore, these practices had important group-dynamic functions for the Johannine community. First, public confession functioned as a costly signal that deterred less committed group members but was meaningful to committed group members. Second, the practice of intercession induced role taking, allowing the offended party to both empathize with the offender and restore his or her dignity and honour.

Introduction

The First Epistle of John reflects practices of confession, intercession, and forgiveness within the Johannine community.[1] The practices are evident in two passages: 1:8–2:2, particularly 1:9, and 5:14–17, particularly v. 16a.

> ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἀφῇ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθαρίσῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας.
>
> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1:9)
>
> Εάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, αἰτήσει καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ ζωήν, τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον.

[1] This study will avoid the term "penance," since the practices that may fall under the umbrella of "penance" are so diverse in the history of Christianity that the term might become misleading. Cf. J. Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (New York: Pueblo, 1986); I. Goldhahn-Müller, *Die Grenze der Gemeinde: Studien zum Problem der Zweiten Buße im Neuen Testament unter Berücksichtigung der Entwicklung in 2. Jh. bis Tertullian* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); B. Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda: Die kirchliche Buße im ältesten Christentum bis Cyprian und Origenes* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1940).

> If someone sees his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask and give him life – to those sinning not unto death. (5:16a)

This study argues that these practices, if observed, had important group-dynamic effects.[2] Behavioural research on rituals and forgiveness will heuristically aid the analysis of these potential effects.[3] First, we investigate the character of forgiveness in 1 John. Second, we discuss how the practice of confession in 1 John functioned as a costly signal, that is, a signal of sincere commitment to the group. Third, we examine how the practice of intercession and mediation of forgiveness helped the group handle forgiveness and reconciliation in a collectivistic context, where honour and shame made forgiveness between equals difficult.

Integrated Communal Acceptance and Divine Forgiveness in 1 John

Definitions of forgiveness vary considerably in contemporary forgiveness research, depending on the goal of the analysis. In Everett L. Worthington's summary of how different researchers from the behavioural sciences define forgiveness, it is possible to distinguish four dimensions: a) emotional (e.g., change from anger to affection), b) attitudinal (change of motivation for action), c) relational[4] (restoration of relationships, reconciliation), and d) pragmatic (e.g., resuming cooperation).[5]

This analysis will focus on the relational and pragmatic aspects of forgiveness. The reason to focus on these rather than the emotional and attitudinal aspects is not that the members of the community of 1 John did not have emotions and

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[2] We will never know to what extent the norms of 1 John were practised in real community life. However, this analysis proceeds from the assumption that 1 John 1:9 and 5:16 reflect and influenced community practices.

[3] The "heuristic" use of the behavioural sciences to structure our interpretation of history is well established, see e.g., P. F. Esler, "Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation," *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context* (ed. P. F. Esler; London: SCM, 2005), 3–14; G. Theißen, *Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen: Eine Psychologie des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlags-Haus, 2007), 20-32. This study will be sensitive to both cross-culturally recurring and culture-specific patterns of human behaviour.

[4] Everett calls this aspect "interpersonal." In a collectivistic context, where forgiveness often means reconciliation with a group, the word "relational" is more adequate. Moreover, in a religious context, we should include the experienced relation to the divine in the relational aspect of forgiveness.

[5] E. L. Worthington, "Initial Questions About the Art and Science of Forgiving," *Handbook of Forgiveness* (ed. E. L. Worthington; New York: Routledge, 2005), 1–14, esp. 3–5.

attitudes about forgiveness. On the contrary, recent behavioural research on human forgiveness indicates that all humans, including the first Christ-believers, have innate emotional dispositions that stimulate our forgiving (or taking revenge).[6] Rather, the reason not to discuss the emotional aspect is that 1 John does not describe forgiveness in terms that give us a window to what forgiving or being forgiven felt like in the Johannine community.

Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh argue that forgiveness in the New Testament should be understood as mainly relational in the collectivistic context of the first century Mediterranean.[7] In such a context, where the self is constructed in relation to a social network of dyadic relations,[8] one cannot talk about forgiveness in isolation from reconciliation. Malina and Rohrbaugh overstate their case when they claim that the first-century Christians were "anti-introspective" to the extent that they did not consider their emotions,[9] but they are nevertheless right in their emphasis on forgiveness as restoration of relations. Modern discussions whether one can forgive someone emotionally without resuming the relationship are absent in the New Testament, and more recent comparisons of how Congolese (collectivist) and French (individualist) persons understand forgiveness confirm Malina's and Rohrbaugh's suggestion that people from collectivist cultures tend to emphasize the relational aspects of forgiveness.[10]

In contemporary Christian discussions about forgiveness, it is commonplace to say that one can be forgiven by God although one is not forgiven by one's neighbour, at least if one has first seriously tried to set things right. As this analysis will argue, such an understanding of forgiveness seems foreign to 1 John. A group member who is forgiven by God is also accepted by the community (and vice versa). God is the forgiving subject in 1 John (1:9; 2:12[11]). However, the community

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[6] M. McCullough, *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct* (San Francisco, CA: Josey Bass, 2008) xiii–xix, 41–87, 112–156.

[7] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Scientific Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 63–64.

[8] B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 58–80 (originally published in 1981), introduced the notion that a person from a collectivist culture has a "dyadic personality" to biblical studies. That is, such a person experiences his identity as interwoven with others.

[9] L. J. Lawrence, *An Ethnography of the Gospel of Matthew: A Critical Assessment of the Use of the Honour and Shame Model in New Testament Studies* (WUNT 2:165; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 113–141.

[10] J. K. Kadiangandu, E. Mullet and G. Vinsonneau, "Forgivingness: A Congo-France Comparison," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32 (2001): 504–511.

[11] God is most probably the implicit agent of the passive verb ἀφέωνται in 2:12.

is highly involved in the process of forgiveness through confession, intercession, and mediation of forgiveness.

In the beginning of 1 John, the text states that the sinner has to "confess" (ὁμολογέω, 1:9) his sins, refuting the idea that community members may claim that they "have no sin" (ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, 1:8, 10). Some scholars are reluctant to see the confession in 1:9 as a public confession.[12] Raymond E. Brown argues convincingly, however, that the author has public confession in mind: [13] The verb ὁμολογέω is used four more times in 1 John (2:23, 4:2, 3, 15). In all these cases, the verb is used for confessions of the Son, particularly that he "has come in flesh" (4:2) and "is the son of God" (4:15). The use of ὁμολογέω in 4:1–3 is particularly revealing since there the confession is a means by which they can "examine" (δοκιμάζω) and thus "know" (γινώσκω) whether someone is really a community member. Further, 1:8–2:2 is directed to a communal "we," indicating a community setting of the confession. Moreover, public confessions of wrongdoing before a god were practiced among both Jews and Greeks,[14] and other early Christian texts reflect practices of confession in the community (Jas 5:16; Did. 4:14; 14:1).[15] Therefore, we have good reason to think of ὁμολογέω in 1:9 as a public act within the community.

Towards the end of 1 John, community members are instructed to pray for a brother who sins (5:14–17). The general lack of references to institutionalised leadership structures gives us no reason to think that the Johannine community reserved the practice of intercession for an elite group or an office within the community.[16] Although some certainly exercised more leadership than others,[17] they

[12] E.g., S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 30, considers public confession to be a reasonable interpretation, but remains cautious. G. Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 32, thinks that it cannot be decided whether confession is public or solely before God.

[13] R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982), 208.

[14] On the Jewish practice of confessing sins on the day of atonement, see R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 82; On confessions of sins among Greeks, see F. Graf, "Confession, Secrecy and Ancient Societies," *Religion in Cultural Discourse: Essays in Honor of Hans G. Kippenberg on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (ed. Brigitte Luchesi and Kocku von Stuckrad; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 259–272.

[15] B. Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda*, 52–62, 85–97.

[16] Cf. M. Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus* (WUNT 242; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 197–203.

[17] The authoritative "we" in 1:1–5 proclaims a message from a position of charismatic authority. Cf. 2 John 10; 3 John 9.

are all primarily "brothers"[18] (ἀδελφοί, e.g., 3:13).[19] The interceding subject in 5:16 is just "someone" (τις), without further qualification. The instruction to pray for a brother's sins is therefore most probably directed to all group members.

Several features of this instruction are interesting. First, they can pray with "confidence" (παρρησία), knowing that their prayers will effectuate what they pray for (5:14–15, cf. 3:19–23; John 14:13–14; 15:7, 16; 16:23–26), that is, the forgiveness of sins (5:16–17).[20] This implies the sinner's need of the prayers of other community members to receive forgiveness (cf. John 20:23). Second, they should pray for a "brother" (ἀδελφός), that is, a community member, and not people in general.[21] In other words, prayer for the forgiveness of sins is an activity within the community. Third, a group member is considered capable of distinguishing between sins "unto death" (πρὸς θάνατον) and "not unto death" (οὐ πρὸς θάνατον) (5:16–17). In other words, the text imagines that the community may make a judgment call whether a sin should be considered beyond forgiveness and thus merit exclusion from the community.[22] Fourth, 5:16 seems to suggest that it is the praying brother, not God directly, who mediates "life" to the sinning brother. Many commentators find it theologically problematic that the subject of the phrase "shall give him life" (δώσει αὐτῷ ζωήν) seems to be the praying human, since God is clearly the ultimate source of "life" (2:25; 5:11) and the one who forgives sins (1:9) in 1 John.[23] Nevertheless,

[18] As J. Painter, *1, 2 and 3 John* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 182–183, points out, 1 John is silent about "sisters." Although ἀδελφοί may mean "siblings," it is more problematic that the community is addressed as νεανίσκοι and πατέρες in 2:13-14.

[19] John proclaims that the anointing they received teaches them directly so that they need no teaching (2:20–21, 27), indicating relatively flexible leadership structures.

[20] M. M. Thompson, "Intercession in the Johannine Community: 1 John 5.16 in the Context of the Gospel of John," *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 225–245, esp. 228–237, argues convincingly that in the Johannine tradition the prayers of the community are considered analogous to the prayers of Jesus, since they share Jesus' positive relation to the Father.

[21] The vocative ἀδελφοί in 3:13 suggests that "brother" is an ingroup designation.

[22] I here assume the interpretation of the majority of commentators, that "sin unto death" means "sins that leads to spiritual death." In 1 John "death" is the state of those who do not belong to the group, but "life" the state of those who do (3:14f). Since 1 John ideally equates the visible community with the community of God and Christ (no *corpus mixtum*), as this article argues, sins unto death (probably false Christology and hate of brothers, see n. 59) are most likely sins that merit exclusion from the community.

[23] E.g., I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 146 n. 17; Schnackenburg, *Johannine Epistles,* 249; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 300.

from a syntactic point of view, this is the most plausible way to read the text.[24] Moreover, Alan England Brooke, points out Jas 5:15, 20 is structurally similar to 1 John 5:16, and there it is quite clear that a human mediates forgiveness and life.[25] Brown suggests that the praying brother could be seen as the mediator of forgiveness that ultimately comes from God.[26] The latter interpretation is supported by the promise in John 20:23: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."[27] For some reason, most commentators do not note the relation between 1 John 5:16 and John 20:23, but if the Johannine community members found themselves authorized to mediate forgiveness of sins, since they have been given the Spirit (John 20:22), it is not only grammatically but also theologically probable that the (mediating) subject of δώσει in 1 John 5:16 is the praying human. As will be argued further below, the mediating position of group members had a highly important function in the Johannine practice of intercession. "Life" equals membership in the community of 1 John (3:14–15), which means that 5:16 imagines a practice where humans mediate the forgiveness by God necessary for acceptance by the community.

Should we understand 1:9 and 5:16 as two different practices or two glimpses of the same practice? In favour of the former, it is somewhat speculative to juxtapose the practices in 1:9 and 5:16, since they are at opposite ends of the letter.[28] Moreover, Schnackenburg notes that the initiative to pray for a sinner comes from a fellow brother, not from the sinner himself.[29] There are, however, reasons to think that 1:9 and 5:16 are parts of an integrated practice of confession and inter-

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[24] R. Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 87 n. 16, rightly argues that "a change of subject between αἰτήσει ('will ask') and δώσει and the ἐρωτήσῃ ('pray') following is improbable. Otherwise, a τις would be required before (ἵνα) ἐρωτήσῃ in v 16d, which is added in some MSS."

[25] A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1912), 146. A third possible translation, not usually mentioned by commentators, is "it [i.e., the prayer] shall give life." This translation is, however, functionally equivalent to Brown's suggestion.

[26] Brown, *Epistles of John*, 612, 634–635.

[27] The change from a human active voice (ἀφῆτε) to a divine passive voice (ἀφέωνται) indicates that human action mediates divine action.

[28] This is not necessarily a problem. One might argue that the conclusion in 5:13–21 connects to 1:8–2:2 by means of allusion to a practice that was familiar to the audience. I will not pursue this argument in detail here, but many commentators label 5:13–21, "Conclusion" and point out that the passage summarizes many themes of the letter, e.g., Brown, *The Johannine Epistles*, 630–641; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 293–294, 310. The confidence in prayers for forgiveness in 5:14–17 is reminiscent of the assurance that Christ is their advocate in 2:1–2.

[29] Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles,* 83 n. 47.

cession. The most important reason to think that these two verses should be seen as a part of the same practice is that confession and prayer for each other's sins match up well. Marianne M. Thompson argues that if 1 John follows Jewish traditions, where repentance was a condition for forgiveness; "sins unto death" in 5:16 would include sins that have not been confessed, as described in 1:9.[30] Since confession is considered a prerequisite for forgiveness in 1:9, we may suspect that confession is also part of the practice of intercession in 5:16. Moreover, if we juxtapose 1:9 and 5:16 we can see several structural similarities with the practices in Jas 5:15–20 and 1 John 1:8–2:2; 5:14–17:[31]

– Assurance that the prayer is effective in mediating the forgiveness of sins (1 John 5:14–15; Jas 5:16–18)
– An interpretation of forgiveness of sins as bringing the sinner from death to life, implying reintegration into the community (1 John 5:16–17; Jas 5:19–20)
– Confession of sins in the plural, indicating confession of specific sins (1 John 1:9; Jas 5:16)
– Confession of sins in a community context (1 John 1:9; Jas 5:16)
– Prayer in a community context for the sinner (1 John 5:16; Jas 5:15–16)

We will never know for sure to what extent the practices in James and 1 John were similar and perhaps even had influenced each other, but Jas 5:15–20 is the closest analogy we know. The present argument is not dependent upon whether we understand 1:9 and 5:16 as parts of the same practice or as two different practices, but this author finds the former more plausible.

It is reasonable to imagine that confessions and intercessions were recurring in the community. The conditional clauses in 1:9 and 5:16 are iterative, indicating a recurring event.[32] The description of Jesus' activity as an "advocate" (παράκλητος) in 2:1 is in the present tense, suggesting a still ongoing activity. Also, the activity of "sinning" (ἁμαρτάνοντα) in 5:16 is in the present tense, committed by someone who is already a "brother,"[33] indicating an imagination of ongoing sin.[34]

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[30] Cf. M. M. Thompson, "Intercession in the Johannine Community," 242–245.

[31] Cf. B. Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda*, 68–69.

[32] This argument is weakened by the fact that 1 John has a tendency to use the iterative case in conditional clauses where the real case would do, cf. Brown, *Epistles of John*, 207.

[33] Cf. M. M. Thompson, "Intercession in the Johannine Community," 243, who rightly criticises the interpretation that "sins unto death" in 5:16 refer to sins committed by outsiders.

[34] There is no room in this study to relate the apparent claims of sinlessness in 3:6, 9; 5:18 to 1:9; 5:16–17, but it suffices to say that this author views the statements about sinlessness both as an eschatological reality, and as an ideal with an implicit hortative function, cf. I. de la Potterie,

What we have seen so far is that the community is deeply involved in God's forgiveness.[35] Although the forgiving subject in 1 John is God, forgiveness was integrated into the social and cultic life of the community, not just a private matter between God and the individual believer. God forgives, but community members must confess in the community and one community member can mediate forgiveness to another through prayer. This fits a larger pattern in 1 John, where being forgiven and saved by God equals belonging to the community and participation in communal life (1:6–2:2; 2:19; 3:13–18). Those who belong to the community are closely aligned with God: They are born of God and the "seed" of God remains in them (3:9), they have community with the Father and the Son (1:6–7), they have access to knowledge from God through the anointing (2:20–21, 27), and they obey his commands (e.g., 3:19–22). This imagination is quite compatible with the conviction that they have the capacity to understand and mediate God's will in the case of forgiveness, too. As noted above, 5:16 implicitly suggests that community members can decide whether a sin is "unto death" or not.

It is therefore a reasonable assumption that 1 John reflects a community in which mediating (or not mediating) divine forgiveness was part of how they handled conflicts within the group. Forgiveness by God equals acceptance by the community, and non-mediation of forgiveness by the community equals non-forgiveness by God. From this supposition, we will analyse the discourse about forgiveness in 1:9 and 5:16 as outlines of practices with important social functions.

The analysis of forgiveness in 1 John in the following sections of this article will be functionalistic, that is, the aim of the analysis is to understand how the practices of confession, intercession and forgiveness served a social function within the group. Such an approach could be accused of reductionism. This author fully recognizes that the experience of forgiveness by God cannot be reduced to just social gluing. Nevertheless, the experience of divine forgiveness seems to have facilitated social functions within the group. David Sloan Wilson argues forcefully that religion can be socially functional and help groups cooperate in ways that would otherwise have been impossible.[36] In the case of 1 John, we may hypothesise that the

"The impeccability of the Christian According to 1 John 3, 6–9," *Christian Lives by the Spirit* (ed. I. de la Potterie and S. Lyonnet; New York: Alba House, 1971), 175–196.

[35] The integration of divine and interpersonal forgiveness and reconciliation is a frequent phenomenon in Jewish tradition, which has been explored by M. L. Morgan, "Mercy, Repentance, and Forgiveness in Ancient Judaism," *Ancient Forgiveness* (ed. C. L. Griswold and D. Konstan; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[36] D. S. Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

belief in a forgiving God that has granted the group the capacity to mediate divine forgiveness helped the group to resolve conflicts in a constructive way.

Public Confession of Sins as a Costly Signal

As argued above, we should understand the verb "confess" (ὁμολογέω) in 1:9 as referring to public confessions within the community. Since "sins" (ἁμαρτίαι) are in the plural in 1:9, we should assume that the author has confession of specific sins in mind, not just an abstract confession of general sinfulness.[37] In this section, it will be argued that public confession must have been costly for the self-esteem and the social status of the confessor, at least temporarily. The willingness to bear that cost functioned as a costly signal of commitment.

Tertullian gives a fascinating glimpse of what public confession could have been like in his treatise *On Repentance* (*De Paenitentia*, ca. 195 CE), particularly chapters 9–10. Our usage of Tertullian's account (which is later than 1 John) is illustrative of the emotions and social costs involved in confessing sins publicly.[38] In chapter 9, Tertullian insists that repentance must result in public confession, which "is a discipline for prostrating and humiliating a person" (*prosternendi et humilificandi hominis disciplina est*, 9:3). Such humiliation has a twofold purpose, Tertullian claims: it will increase repentance, and it will honour God by showing fear of punishment. In chapter 10, Tertullian deals with what makes many of his fellow Christians avoid the practice of public confession. Many Christians, Tertullian claims, avoid public confession since they "anticipate shame" (*praesumo pudoris*, 10:1). Against this fear of shame Tertullian argues that the Church is not a community where people abuse the information they gain from hearing someone's public confession, but a community which is one body, Christ, who shares the burden of the confessor. "Why do you consider these [Christian

[37] S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 31.

[38] Although Tertullian's account does not strictly prove anything about 1 John, the social and emotional problems he wrestles with are general enough to be valid in other contexts, too. It should be noted, however, that Tertullian seems to have 1 John 1:8–2:2 in mind in these chapters, since he argues that when someone confesses publicly, "Christ intercedes to the Father" (*Christus patrem deprecatur*, 10.6), thus alluding to Christ's function as παράκλητος in 1 John 2:1. There are several references to post-baptismal confession of sin in texts earlier than Tertullian's: *Barn*. 19.12; *1 Clem*. 51:3; 60:1–2; *2 Clem.* 8:2–3; *Did.* 4:14; 14:1; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I.13.5, 7; Jas 5:16. See B. Poschmann, *Paenitentia secunda*; I. Goldhahn-Müller, *Die Grenze der Gemeinde*, for overviews. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I.13.7 mentions that some are ashamed (δυσωπούμεναι) to confess and therefore apostatize. However, Tertullian's account gives us the most lively insight into the shame involved in public confession of sin.

fellows] something other than yourself?" (*quid tu hos aliud quam te opinaris?* 10:4.) Besides, although public confession might be unpleasant, it is better than Hell (see also chapters 11–12).

Tertullian's account gives us an illustration of how socially and emotionally costly public confessions may have been. Admitting your errors in front of the group was shameful. The confessor gave up information that others could use to denigrate the confessor and gain a social advantage for themselves. We should note, however, that confession is considered normative in Tertullian's description. This modifies the social value of public confessions, since people who act according to group norms are usually seen as better group members and thus gain higher status within the group.[39] Confession of sins was therefore both shameful and honourable at the same time. It is reasonable to assume that similar social costs and rewards were involved in the confession of sins pictured in 1 John.

We may broaden our understanding of the cost of confession in 1 John further by relating it to patterns of forgiveness in antiquity. David Konstan has recently shown that the processes of reconciliation, forgiveness, and appeasement of anger in Greek and Roman texts do not concur with modern ideals of forgiveness.[40] After a thorough survey of a large number of texts from a wide range of genres, he concludes:

> The Greek and Latin terms *sunginôskô* and *ignosco*, usually rendered as *forgive* in English, do not properly bear that meaning, as forgiveness is commonly understood today – that is, a response to an offense that involves moral transformation on the part of the forgiver and forgiven and a complex of sentiments and behaviors that include sincere confession, remorse and repentance. I suggested that, on the contrary, the appeasement of anger and the relinquishment of revenge were rather perceived as resting on the restoration of the dignity of the injured party, whether through compensation or gestures of deference, or else by way of discounting the offense on the grounds that it was in some sense involuntary or unintentional.[41]

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[39] According to social identity theory, people who act according to group norms are usually more appreciated and gain more influence over the group, see e.g., J. C. Turner, "Explaining the Nature of Power: A Three-Process Theory," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 35 (2005): 1–22.

[40] D. Konstan, *Before Forgiveness,* 22–90. Konstan surveys a great number of texts that cannot be recounted here. The examples from Greek and Roman texts in this section of the present analysis are merely illustrative.

[41] D. Konstan, *Before Forgiveness*, 59. (ἀφίημι, the most common word for "forgive" in the New Testament, is not used with the meaning "forgive" in other Greek texts, except in Jewish and Christian texts inspired by the Septuagint, which translates נשׂא and סלח with ἀφίημι.)

As opposed to modern ideals, where admitting one's wrongdoing ideally is a way to accept moral responsibility and show willingness to moral reform (repentance), Konstan argues quite convincingly that the goal of admitting wrongdoing in antiquity was often simply to demonstrate one's respect and humble position below the other and thus restore the dignity of the offended party. For instance, according to Aristotle the main reason to admit one's fault, was to humble oneself and show respect for the other (*Rhetoric,* 1380a/2.3.5–6).

Konstan does not relate his observation to the code of honour and shame in antiquity, but the connection is easily recognizable.[42] By being submissive, the transgressor shows that he respects the offended party as superior and thus restores the honour of the offended party. In the Mediterranean culture of honour and shame, it was often considered below the dignity of a superior to be angry with an inferior. Rather, the honourable attitude of a superior was to be merciful towards an inferior, or at least not angry. For instance, according to Seneca, clemency is the most important virtue for a ruler (*On Mercy*, e.g., 1.5). Therefore, submissive displays can appease anger and thus sometimes restore a relation. The confessing person shows the other person that he or she is willing to pay the social price of shame to restore the relation. Seneca writes: "The man who has offended you is either stronger or weaker than you: If he is weaker, spare him; if he is stronger, spare yourself" (*Moral Epistles* I, 5.5.8). Seneca's aphorism also shows the other side of the coin – there is no reason to ask for forgiveness if you are the superior. As Aristotle writes in the context discussed above: "It is impossible to be afraid and be angry at the same time" (*Rhetoric*, 1380a/2.3.5–6). The basic pattern of reconciliation in asymmetrical relations can be summarized like this: The inferior should admit the errors of his or her way and not argue in order to show due honour to the superior, but the superior had no obligation to ask the inferior for forgiveness or mercy. Rather, the duty of the superior is to treat the inferior mercifully when offended.

While submissive confession of wrongdoing was a suitable strategy for inferiors as a way to appease their superiors among Greeks and Romans, it was a costly resort in relation to equals. For example, Melissa Barden Dowling demonstrates that when Julius Caesar showed clemency toward his former enemies in the

[42] On honour and shame, see e.g., B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 27–57; H. Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (ed. R. L. Rohrbaugh; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 19–40; R. L. Rohrbaugh, "Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World," *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (ed. D. Neufeld and R. E. DeMaris; New York: Routledge, 2010), 109–125.

Roman senate, many senators reacted quite negatively.[43] They felt that the imposed mercy denigrated them and obliged them to be loyal and submissive, and this reduced the power of the senate. In a paradigm of honour and shame, every encounter with an equal is a game of reciprocation where the goal is to behave in a way that maintains one's honour.[44] Admitting wrongdoing meant giving up honour and thus paying the price of reduced social status. Konstan shows that in interaction between equals, for instance in a court, the transgressor's primary strategy was to make the transgression excusable.[45] For instance, the transgression might be the result of circumstances beyond his or her control, such as lacking knowledge, uncontrollable external events, or powerful passions. We can easily relate these observations of Konstan's to the paradigm of honour and shame. If the other party accepts the explanation, the transgressor can be excused, and a mutually honourable relation can be restored. In a context of honour and shame, excusing the other was probably often the most trouble-free solution to maintain the honour of both parties. However, if the offended party is not persuaded to excuse the transgressor, the offender might have to admit a wrong, be shamed, and lose status. When the offender loses status, the dignity of the offended is restored. In some cases that might restore the relationship between the two. In other cases, the refusal to excuse the other might be the beginning of a feud.

Konstan continues his exploration of forgiveness in antiquity by examining Jewish (and Christian) texts.[46] The pattern of repentance was of course much stronger in the Jewish tradition. Countless ancient Jewish texts emphasise repentance as a condition of God's forgiveness.[47] But repentance was always in relation to God, who was in no way equal to man. In this way, the pattern that one should primarily admit wrongdoing submissively in relation to one's superior is present in Jewish thinking, too. There was no shame in yielding to God.

Scenes where one person asks for the forgiveness of another human are quite rare in the Hebrew Bible.[48] When people occasionally do ask other persons for

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[43] M. B. Dowling, *Clemency & Cruelty in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 29–75, esp. 33–34.

[44] Cf. the logic of challenge and riposte described in B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World,* 40–43.

[45] Konstan, *Before Forgiveness*, 38–58.

[46] Konstan, *Before Forgiveness*, 91–124.

[47] M. L. Morgan, "Mercy, Repentance, and Forgiveness in Ancient Judaism."

[48] D. J. Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology: The Case of Interpersonal Forgiveness," *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason* (ed. J. Barton and D. J. Reimer; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 259–282.

forgiveness in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, they always do it in a most submissive way (Gen 32:20; 50:15–18; 1 Sam 19:18–20; 25:23–28). Thus, both the pattern that the inferior repented and confessed to the superior and the pattern that one had to humble oneself to acknowledge the superiority of the other in order to be forgiven or treated with mercy, was the same in Jewish and Greco-Roman thinking. The main difference was that repentance was much more central to Jews than to Greeks and Romans.

Apologies are costly in our society, too. People in modern society often hesitate to express repentance. Julie J. Exline and Roy F. Baumeister discuss the most common barriers for expressing repentance: disagreement with the charge, fear of social consequences, and shame.[49] Bernard Weiner et al. have shown that, on the one hand, voluntary confession makes a person more agreeable than blank denial of a transgression, but, on the other hand, those who confess are nevertheless not held in as high esteem as those who do not have to confess to anything.[50] In a way, the situation is still very much the same as it was in antiquity. If we look at real processes of confession and forgiveness rather than theological ideals of confession, the concerns of modern people can be surprisingly similar to those we find in antiquity. However, it is reasonable to claim that the concerns were often accentuated in antiquity, since honour and shame typically played an even more important role in their social interaction than they do in our interaction.

If we return to 1 John and to Tertullian's discussion about regular public confession, we realize that many Christ-believers must have found it costly to participate. The anticipation of shame (Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 10.1) must have been a barrier to public confession of sins in a society where honour was an important social commodity. If the community of 1 John was a community of equals, as argued above, confession of sins before the group was probably experienced as a loss of status within the group.

If public confession is experienced as costly, we can deepen our understanding of this practice by relating it to *costly signalling theory* of religious rituals, originally proposed by William Irons.[51] (Although we cannot assume that the practice of

[49] J. J. Exline and R. F. Baumeister, "Expressing Forgiveness and Repentance: Benefits and Barriers," *Forgiveness: Theory, Research and Practice* (ed. M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, and C. E. Thoresen; New York: Guilford, 1999), 111–132.

[50] B. Weiner, S. Graham, P. Orli, and M. Zmuidinas, "Public Confession and Forgiveness," *Journal of Personality* 59 (1991): 281–312.

[51] W. Irons, "Morality, Religion, and Human Nature," *Religion and Science: History, Method, and Dialogue* (ed. W. Richardson and W. Wildman; New York: Routledge, 1996), 375–

confession in 1 John was a ritual in a strict sense, Irons' theory is applicable to the practice of confessions.) According to Irons, humans (and other social species) need to distinguish reliable cooperation partners from unreliable partners. In order to do so, we look for signals that potential partners intend to cooperate. But how can we avoid the problem that others may send deceptive signals? By making the signal so costly and so hard to fake that no one but someone who really intends to cooperate will be motivated enough to bear the cost of sending the signal. However, the cost must not be so high that it deters even committed cooperation partners. A group that successfully maintains costly signals that separate committed and reliable cooperation partners from not so committed free riders will be more functional than a group that fails to develop such signals. That is the basic idea of costly signalling theory of religious rituals. Public confession of sins in 1:9 could be understood as such a signal. Only a committed member would accept the social risks involved in allowing others to see his or her shame.

The signal only works if we have reason to believe that the committed group member perceives the net cost of the signal as much lower than the sceptic.[52] If the committed group members interpret the cost as low but the non-committed group member interprets the cost as high, the costly signal will have the capacity to deter the less committed without deterring the committed. (Having less committed group members need not necessarily be a problem, but in certain situations the influence of less committed group members may reduce the functionality of the group.) Do we have reason to think that public confession was experienced as less costly by committed group members in the community of 1 John than it was for less committed group members? I think so.

First, a committed group member, as opposed to a more sceptical member, probably accepts the beliefs of the group. In the case of 1 John, we may suspect a recent history of division between one group in the community who claimed to have no sin (1:8, 10), and another group who emphasized the need for continual

399; W. Irons. "Religion as a Hard-to-Fake Sign of Commitment," *Evolution and the Capacity for Commitment* (ed. R. M. Nesse; New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 292–309. The theory has since then been further developed by e.g., J. Bulbulia, "Religious Costs as Adaptations That Signal Altruistic Intention," *Evolution and Cognition* 10 (2004): 19–38; R. Sosis, "Does Religion Promote Trust? The Role of Signaling, Reputation, and Punishment," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 1 (2005): 1–30.

[52] R. Sosis, "Why aren't we all Hutterites? Costly Signaling Theory and Religious Behaviour," *Human Nature* 14 (2003): 91–127.

forgiveness (1:9, 2:1–2).[53] The latter group believed that public confession was instrumental in gaining eternal life, while the former apparently did not. The letter gives us hints that the non-confessing group had been marginalized and left the group (2:18–24, esp. v. 19; 4:1–6). If the community of 1 John was in a social situation where they felt the need to distinguish themselves from those who presented alternative teachings, public confession would have been quite an effective costly signal, since the net value of public confession would have been experienced very differently by these two groups.

Second, a committed group member derives a substantial portion of his self-esteem and social status from being a good group member, as opposed to a less committed group member who rather maintains self-esteem by other means and seeks other arenas for his or her social interaction.[54] Therefore, if confessing sins publicly was considered to be prototypical behaviour, committed group members would experience the pride and social status of acting prototypically by confessing as to some degree compensating for the shame of displaying their sins to other group members.[55]

Third, the committed group member most probably felt more dyadically connected than the sceptic to the other group members and therefore perceived less risk of being exploited when he or she confesses. As we saw above, Tertullian argues that one should not fear confessing sins within the group, since all other group members will share the confessor's burden rather than take advantage of the confessor. They are really all one (*On Repentance* 10.4). 1 John describes the group as a "community" (κοινωνία, 1:3, 6–7). The relations between group members are characterized by love (e.g., 4:12). These expressions of intimate community give us

[53] E.g., R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), 126, mirror-reads 1:8, 10 as reflecting a group of secessionists who think that they are free from sin. Brown's suggestion is but one of many reconstructions of the dissidents from the community, see e.g., R. B. Edwards, *The Johannine Epistles* (New Testament Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 57–68. J. Lieu, "Us or You? Persuation and Identity in 1 John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008): 805–819, warns against mirror-reading 1 John too easily, but does not deny the existence of a group of opponents. Even if 1:8, 10 only represents a fictive antitype of the ingroup prototype, this antitype may have functioned as a fence against tendencies that could easily occur in the discourse of the community.

[54] N. Ellemers, R. Spears, and B. Doosje, "Self and Social Identity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 26 (2002): 161–86; N. Ellemers, W. van Risjwijk, J. Bruins, and J. de Gilder, "Group Commitment as a Moderator of Attributional and Behavioural Responses to Power Use," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 28 (2005): 555–572.

[55] Cf. n. 39.

reason to think that a committed group member would have experienced other group members as reliable, while a less committed group member would not have shared that trust.

In sum, public confession of sin within the Johannine community was probably experienced as a net gain for committed group members, but a net loss for less committed group members and unconvinced outsiders. As such, the practice of confession could function as a costly signal that repulsed less committed group members but attracted committed group members. This practice was probably functional in a social situation where they had to distinguish themselves from a group of people that previously had belonged to the community (2:19). (In another social situation, the signalling cost of public confession would probably have been unnecessarily high.[56])

Mediation of Forgiveness as a Means of Conflict Resolution

On the one hand, public confession was made before the community and could therefore be experienced as shameful. On the other hand, the confession of sins was also made before God, the ultimate superior, and confession of guilt before a superior was proper, as we discussed in the previous section. Therefore, the social and the spiritual dimension of public confession would trigger contradictive intuitions. Was this tension resolved in the community of 1 John?

Rituals typically involve roles, which the participants of the ritual can play.[57] (Although 1 John does not give us enough information to claim that the practices in 1:9 and 5:16 are rituals in a strict sense, I will treat the practices as rituals in the limited sense that they provide roles.) All participants in the ritual drama are aware

[56] According to J. Dallen, *The Reconciling Community,* 5–130, the requirement of public confession continued during the persecutions in the second and third century but was gradually transformed into a private confession in the fourth century and thereafter, although public confession was still sometimes practiced for serious transgressions. From a bird's eye view, this development seems to coincide with the lessened need to test the commitment of community members.

[57] The idea that religion in general and rituals in particular involve assuming roles is used in many different ritual theories, e.g., E. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual. Essays in Face-to-Face Interaction* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1967); R. N. McCauley and E. T. Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32–33; R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 39–40; H. Sundén, *Religionen och rollerna* (Stockholm: Diakonistyrelsen, 1959).

not only of their own role but also of the role of the other participants in the ritual and therefore anticipate certain responses from the other participants.[58] In the key passages in 1 John, 1:9 and 5:16, two explicit roles can be detected: a) the person mediating forgiveness through prayer, and b) the transgressor confessing and receiving forgiveness. We may also assume that usually there was also c) a victim of the sin, since the understanding of sin in 1 John is largely focused on interpersonal relations within the community, that is, love, hate and the practical consequences thereof (e.g., 3:14–18).[59] Sometimes, however, the whole community might be the injured party. That would, for instance, be the case when the sin is related to false teachings, such as denial that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4:1–3), since such transgressions undermine the cognitive certainty of the whole group.[60] Finally, we have the implicit role of d) the Father, who is imagined to forgive through the Son (1:9; 2:1–2, 12).

The mediator performs three actions: He 1) "sees" (ἴδῃ) the transgression, 2) "shall pray" (αἰτήσει) for the transgressor, and finally, 3) "shall give life" (δώσει ... ζωήν) to the transgressor, that is, mediate forgiveness (5:16). All these actions are described in the third person singular, although the introduction in the two preceding verses (5:14–15) and the elaboration in the following verses (5:18–20) are in the first person plural. This gives the impression of a community context, "we," in 5:14–15, 18–20, in which a mediator prays in 5:16.

As discussed above, it is possible that 1:9 and 5:16 were two different practices. In that case, the role of the transgressor (b) would be reduced to receiving forgiveness. That would not significantly change the role of the mediator (a), and the main point of this section would therefore still be valid. In the following, however, we will assume that confession and intercession were integrated practices.

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[58] H. Sundén, *Religionen och rollerna*, suggests that role taking also involves an expectation of the related roles in the ritual.

[59] D. M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5.16–17," *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 230–246, argues that the two major kinds of sin in 1 John are a) "murder," that is, hating and not helping other group members (e.g., 3:11–18), and b) "lying," that is, false Christology (e.g., 2:22–23, 4:1–3).

[60] We are emotionally dependent on the support of others to maintain cognitive certainty, particularly about beliefs that are not directly verifiable, see J-P. Deconchy, "Rationality and Control in Orthodox Systems," *The Social Dimension: European Developments in Social Psychology* (ed. H. Tajfel; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 425–445; L. Festinger, S. Schachter, and K. Back, *Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing* (New York: Harper, 1950).

The role of the transgressor is to confess his sins (1:9). It is possible to assume that confession of sins comes either before "see," between "see" and "pray," or after "give life" in 5:16. The order of events may be reconstructed in several ways, for instance:

Sequence variant one: The sinner's confession in the community makes the community "see," the mediator prays, and thus mediates forgiveness.

Sequence variant two: A community member sees a brother sin (and confronts the brother), the brother confesses his sin, followed by prayer and mediation of forgiveness.

Sequence variant three: A sin is seen by someone, who then prays (in the community) and somehow mediates "life," which somehow induces confession and thus forgiveness.

Which of these scenarios is most plausible in real community life is of course a matter of speculation and we should not necessarily assume a fixed sequence of events. The first scenario is closest to the sequence in Jas 5:15–20. The second scenario, however, captures the meaning of "see" in a more natural way than the first scenario. The third is the least probable scenario, since it requires a belief that prayer will induce some kind of supernatural causality that leads the transgressor to confess.

The actions of the mediator are of great interest since he or she symbolically takes two different roles. First, the mediator speaks for the transgressor to God, and then he or she mediates God's forgiveness to the transgressor. In other words, the mediator first takes the role of representative of the sinner, and then takes the role of representative of God.

Who is this mediator? As was discussed earlier, nothing in 1 John indicates that the mediator is some kind of office. On the contrary, the role of the mediator could most probably be played by any community member. The scenario imagined in 5:16 is that the same person who sees the sin also takes the role of the mediator. We may therefore guess that it is sometimes the sufferer of the sin who prays. While this is beyond what we can know, one likely person to "see" someone sin against a brother is the very victim of the sin, at least in cases where the sin affects an individual group member. If some other community member than the victim of the sin "sees" the transgression, that person is an indirect victim, a co-sufferer, since he or she probably sympathizes with the victim, who is a community fellow. In intimate communities, the fate of one affects the whole group. In some cases, it might even be that the whole community consider themselves the direct sufferers, for instance if the sin consists of claiming a false Christology, as suggested above.

Assuming that this reconstruction is fairly correct, we have a most interesting ritual which induces role taking. First, the sufferer of a transgression, or another emotionally involved community member, takes the role of representative of the transgressor as he speaks on behalf of the transgressor before God. Then the mediator takes the role of representative of God as he or she mediates forgiveness to the transgressor on behalf of God. This mediating role was easily recognizable from the scriptures, where priests and prophets acted on behalf of the people towards God and on behalf of God towards the people. Both priest and prophets could be mediators of forgiveness (e.g., Lev 4:26; 2 Sam 12:13).[61] The analogy with the priest and the prophet is, however, only partial for two reasons: First, in the community of 1 John, any brother could take the role of mediator. Second, in the community of 1 John, the very sufferer (or a co-sufferer) of the transgression was probably sometimes the mediator.

Now, role reversal, where one takes the role and the perspective of the other, is a well-documented method for inducing forgiveness, empathy, and conflict resolution.[62] By taking the perspective of the offender, the offended party's empathy with the offender increases, and as a result the victim of sin often becomes more willing to forgive. The framework of the ritual, where the sufferer, or the co-suffering community brothers of the sufferer, pray on behalf of the transgressor, stimulates such a change of perspective. We may therefore assume that intercession changed the community's attitude towards the transgressor in a favourable direction.

However, the ritual does not end with taking the role of the transgressor but continues with giving the mediator the role of God's representative. Thus, the role-taking allows acting from a position of superiority. As we discussed in the previous section, forgiveness was understood in antiquity as an asymmetrical process where the superior showed mercy toward the inferior. The ritual framework situated the mediator – who was sometimes the victim of the transgression, sometimes a co-sufferer of the victim, and sometimes a representative of the collectively

[61] T. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission* (SNTSMS 150; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 132–178; D. Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?' Human and Angelic Agents, and Divine Forgiveness in Early Judaism," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2011): 351–374.

[62] D. W. Johnson, "Role Reversal: A Summary and Review of the Research," *International Journal of Group Tensions* 1 (1971): 318–334. More generally, any method that increases empathy increases the chance of forgiveness, see W. Malcolm, S. Warwar, and L. Greenberg, "Facilitating Forgiveness in Individual Therapy as an Approach to Resolving Interpersonal Injuries," *Handbook of Forgiveness* (ed. E. L. Worthington; New York: Routledge, 2005), 379–398.

suffering community – in a superior position that restored the honour of the victim(s), and from that position the mediator could be forgiving, acting together with God.[63]

As discussed above, the Johannine community was a community where most of the members were just "brothers," that is, most community members considered themselves equal in status compared to others. As we discussed in the previous section, repentance and forgiveness between equals was rare in antiquity.[64] A community of "brothers" could therefore easily be torn apart in competitions for honour in the aftermath of transgression within the group. This problem is solved by letting other group members mediate God's forgiveness in a ritual of confession, intercession, and forgiveness. In that ritual setting, the asymmetrical conditions for forgiveness are temporarily created, and when the ritual is over, the group can resume their interaction. The integration of human and divine forgiveness helped resolve an otherwise difficult problem of social interaction.

Conclusion

For the community of 1 John, divine forgiveness and belonging to the community were integrated to the extent that one equalled the other. 1:9 and 5:16 reflect the outline of practices of public confession, intercession, and forgiveness that mediated God's forgiveness and at the same time reconciled group members who had transgressed the norms of the group. These practices had (at least) two group dynamic functions. First, public confession functioned as a costly signal that deterred less committed group members but was meaningful to committed group members. Second, the ritual induced role-taking, allowing the offended party to both empathize with the offender and restore his or her dignity and honour.

[63] Cf. J. G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Forgiveness and Mercy* (ed. J. G. Murphy, J. Hampton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 14–34, 28. Murphy suggests that an apology can function like a ritual that humiliates the one who apologizes and thereby restores the honour of the offended party.

[64] In this respect, Sir 28:2 and Matt 18:21–22/Luke 17:3–4 are rare as the texts imagine interpersonal forgiveness of an equal.

Forgiveness of the Sinless

A Classic Contradiction in 1 John in the Light of Contemporary Forgiveness Research

Forgiveness in 1 John is an enigma, which has generated countless scholarly discussions. One discussion concerns the limit of forgiveness in 1 John.

> Ἐάν τις ἴδῃ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτάνοντα ἁμαρτίαν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον, αἰτήσει καὶ δώσει αὐτῷ ζωήν, τοῖς ἁμαρτάνουσιν μὴ πρὸς θάνατον. ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον· οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ. πᾶσα ἀδικία ἁμαρτία ἐστίν, καὶ ἔστιν ἁμαρτία οὐ πρὸς θάνατον.
>
> If someone sees his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask and give him life – to those sinning not unto death. There is sin unto death. I do not talk about that [sin], that he should pray [for the brother]. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin not unto death. (1 John 5:16–17)

What is the difference between "sins unto death," which one should pray for, and "sin not unto death," which one is not obliged to pray for, in 5:16–17?

A related enigma is how 1 John can state both that community members who claim to be free from sin have got it wrong (1:8–2:2) and that community members cannot sin (3:6, 9; 5:18).

> ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, ἑαυτοὺς πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν. ἐὰν ὁμολογῶμεν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, πιστός ἐστιν καὶ δίκαιος, ἵνα ἀφῇ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας καὶ καθαρίσῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἀδικίας.
>
> If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. (1 John 1:8–9)
>
> πᾶς ὁ ἐν αὐτῷ μένων οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει· πᾶς ὁ ἁμαρτάνων οὐχ ἑώρακεν αὐτὸν οὐδὲ ἔγνωκεν αὐτόν. … ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ἐκ τοῦ διαβόλου ἐστίν … Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ, ὅτι σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ μένει, καὶ οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ γεγέννηται.
>
> Everyone who remains in him does not sin. Everyone who sins has neither seen him nor known him. … Whoever does sin is of the Devil … Everyone born of God does not do

> sin, since the seed of him remains in him, and he cannot sin, since he is born of God. (1 John 3:6, 8a, 9)

Why must community members confess sins (1:8–10) and pray for the sins of other "brothers" (5:16–17), although they do not and cannot sin (3:6, 9; 5:18)?

In this chapter, I evaluate a number of influential scholarly answers to the questions above in the light of contemporary research on forgiveness and a number of related fields in the behavioural sciences, chiefly from different branches of the cognitive sciences.[1] I argue that scholars have used their intuitions about forgiveness in order to find solutions to exegetical problems – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. Then I suggest a novel interpretation based on forgiveness research and other branches of the behavioural sciences. This interpretation will emphasize that 1 John's aim is to form the identity and the practical communal life of the community, and that the discourse on forgiveness is an aspect of this ambition. My suggestion in the final section of this chapter is that although the statements may be considered self-contradictory from a theological point for view (emic perspective), the contradictory statements nevertheless, from a functionalist viewpoint, can be understood as promoting a balance of social practices that helped the Johannine community to prevail (etic perspective).

In the late 19th century, commentators such as Brooke Foss, Westcott and Alfred Plummer assumed that 1 John handles primarily the saving forgiveness of individuals.[2] Beginning with Robert Law in 1909, however, several scholars have interpreted 1 John's discourse about sinlessness and forgiveness as "vehement polemic" against a historical situation of conflict with secessionists.[3] (Together with several commentators, I use "secessionist" as a term for those who "went out from

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[1] There are excellent surveys of scholarly suggestions in most scholarly commentaries, e.g., R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982), 411–416, 610–619; C. G. Kruse, *the Letters of John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 126–123, 193–194. The innovation of this paper is that I evaluate the proposal in the light of behavioural research.

[2] Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St John: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1886), 23–26, 104–108; Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St John* (Cambridge Greek Testament; Cambridge University Press, 1886), 82–84, 124–128, when expounding 1:8–10 and 3:6–9, write solely of the relation between the individual and God.

[3] R. Law, *The Tests of life: A Study of The First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1909), 226. Later also e.g., R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), 124–127; C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (MNTC; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), 78–81; H. C. Swadling, "Sin and Sinlessness in I John," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35 (1982): 206–209.

us," 2:19, that is, somehow separated themselves from the Johannine community.) I consider this scholarly development a progress, since such interpretations appreciate the group dynamic functions of the text's theology of forgiveness. In the 1990s, however, Judith Lieu and Terry Griffith rightly argued that this kind of situational interpretation could not capture the character of 1 John fully, since the theology of 1 John is not solely a mirror of a schism but aims to build the identity of the Johannine community more broadly.[4] Griffith perhaps goes too far when he claims that any reference to a historical crisis is unnecessary in order to understand the letter. Lieu is more balanced:

However serious the schism, the polemic against specific views and claims of opponents does not control the letter or its thought. The so-called "moral debate" is not explicitly related to the schismatics and so should not be interpreted purely as a reaction against them.[5]

Neither Lieu nor Griffith interprets 1 John as a timeless theological treatise, but rightly understands the theology of forgiveness and non-forgiveness of community members as interwoven with the goal of maintaining a meaningful identity of the community. In 1 John, forgiveness and acceptance by God equals belonging to the community and vice versa (e.g., 1:7; 2:19; 3:14).[6] I will follow their lead, and therefore socio-cognitive research on forgiveness and identity formation will be most valuable tools in our interpretation.[7] As psychologist and forgiveness researcher Michael McCullough would say, theologies of forgiveness often have important group dynamic functions.[8]

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[4] T. Griffith, "A Non-Polemical Reading of 1 John: Sin, Christology and the Limits of Johannine Christianity," *Tyndale Bulletin* 49 (1998): 253–276; J. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (NT Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).

[5] Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, 15–16.

[6] Cf. Griffith, "A Non-Polemical Reading of 1 John," 265–266.

[7] The "heuristic" use of the behavioural sciences to structure our interpretation of history is well established, see e.g., P. F. Esler, "Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation' in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context* (ed. P. F. Esler; London: SCM, 2005), 3–14; G. Theissen, *Erleben und Verhalten der ersten Christen: Eine Psychologie des Urchristentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlags-Haus, 2007), 20–32.

[8] Cf. M. McCullough, *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct* (San Francisco, CA: Josey Bass, 2008), 202–223.

The Limits of Forgiveness: Sin unto Death and Sin Not unto Death

We begin by using behavioural research on forgiveness and identity formation to evaluate different scholarly interpretations of what sins are impossible (1 John 3:9) and what sins are "unto death" (5:16–17) for a Johannine community member.

Habitual and Occasional Sins

Brooke Foss Westcott suggests in his commentary from 1886 that what the author really means to say in 1 John 3:6, 9 is that those who are born of God do not sin habitually, over and over again.[9] This interpretation is comparable to the theology of the *Psalms of Solomon*, where the righteous "stumbles" but does not commit "sin after sin" (*Ps. Sol.* 3:5–8, cf. 9:5–7; 13:7–10; 16:11). Although Westcott's understanding has not convinced scholars in the last decades,[10] it remains popular.[11] The main argument for this view is that the author uses the present tense, which is a durative tense, when he claims that those who remain in Christ do not and cannot sin in 1 John 3:6, 9, but the aorist tense, which is a punctiliar tense, when he writes about what happens if someone sins in 2:1. This argument rests on subtleties and ignores that the present tense is used about sinning brothers in 1:8 and 5:16.[12]

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to understand why this suggestion remains popular in spite of scholarly objections. It is utterly unrealistic to assume that there has ever been a social group where not even occasional moral transgressions existed, particularly if the norms of the group include helping brothers in material need (3:16–18). As Johannes Heinrich August Ebrard writes, "it would be a frightful and most depressing utterance, that whosoever sins in any sense whatever, has no part in Christ."[13] On the other hand, any group that allows habitual transgression of group norms is bound to dissolve or change into something else.

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[9] Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, 104.

[10] E.g., S. Kubo, "1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 7 (1969): 47–56.

[11] NIV translates 3:6 "*keeps on* sinning" and 3:9 "*will continue to* sin … *go on* sinning" (emphasis added).

[12] Kubo, "1 John 3:9"; Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 79.

[13] J. H. A. Ebrard, *Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850), 228.

This problem was well explored in game theoretical computer simulation on cooperation and forgiveness, pioneered by Robert Axelrod.[14] Game theoretical models, which have been most influential in contemporary forgiveness research,[15] show that limited forgiveness seems to be the most successful cooperation strategy. Axelrod simulated different strategies, representing cooperating individuals, in iterated series of cooperation. In these simulations, it was possible to gain extra resources at the cost of one's cooperation partner by defecting (cheating, stop cooperating), but if both players defected, they both gained less resources than if they had both cooperated. The result of his initial simulations was that a simple strategy called "tit for tat" was more successful than all other strategies: Do whatever the other player did to you last round. That is, cooperate as long as the other player cooperates, but if the other player defects, retaliate by defecting the next round. This strategy gave both fruitful cooperation with cooperative partners and protection against nasty cheats. The result suggests that any social species needs to combine the capacity to cooperate with the capacity to cut cooperation with non-cooperative partners.

However, "tit for tat" is not forgiving, but retaliating without hesitation. Does this mean that forgiveness is socially irrational? Axelrod realized that the simulations lacked something that could be likened to mistakes and moral weakness. Therefore, he added "noise," that is, mistakes, to the simulations. Under these conditions, strategies called "forgiving tit for tat" and "contrite tit for tat" came out as winners rather than "[non-forgiving] tit for tat." Forgiving tit for tat "forgives" a defector once or twice before retaliation. That is, it continues cooperation one or two times before it stops cooperating. As opposed to the ordinary tit for tat strategy, this strategy can handle occasional mistakes without terminating cooperation too quickly. Therefore, this strategy is able to gain more resources in cooperation with flawed partners. Contrite tit for tat is a "repentant" strategy. It cooperates one or two rounds after making a mistake even if the other player retaliates, in order to turn the other player back into cooperative mode. This strategy is able to avoid endless feuds. Yet, even in simulations with noise, ever-forgiving strategies did not do that well, since they never protected themselves from exploitation by nasty strategies. These results are also supported by studies on real people. Most people forgive to a certain extent, but not unconditionally, and people are more willing

[14] R. Axelrod, *The Complexity of Cooperation: Agent-Based Models of Competition and Collaboration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[15] McCullough, *Beyond Revenge,* 88–101.

to forgive those who repent and apologize.[16] We humans have an emotional setup that helps us maintain a balance between forgiveness and retaliation.[17] The same principle is valid on a cultural level. Groups endorsing cultural ideals that balance cooperation, forgiveness, and punishment of transgressors, will do better than one-sidedly forgiving or one-sidedly retaliating cultures.[18] This last point is important, since 1 John reflects a cultural phenomenon.

According to social identity theory, every group is motivated to maximize its a) collective self-esteem and b) distinctiveness.[19] These are cognitive (rather than material) resources that groups aim to maximize. Now, group-members who deviate by transgressing group norms can undermine both self-esteem and distinctiveness.[20] If the group's self-esteem is based on moral superiority, as it clearly is in 1 John, group members who sin undermine this self-image and the experience of moral distinctiveness. Consequently, it can be quite destructive for the social identity of a group to harbour habitual deviators. It can even be satisfying for the group to exclude deviators, since exclusion manifests the identity of the group and maintains its boundaries.[21]

Therefore, Westcott's suggestion is realistic in a very general sense. The interpretation of 1 John that God – and thereby the community – forgives occasional sinners but excludes those who sin habitually without any sign of remorse, is socially realistic, simply because it is reasonable to act that way in any group. Westcott seems to have used his human intuitions about interpersonal forgiveness

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[16] E. Mullet and G. Michèle, "Developmental and Cognitive Points of View on Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research and Practice* (ed. M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, and C. E. Thoresen; New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 111–132; B. Weiner et al., "Public Confession and Forgiveness," *Journal of Personality* 59 (1991): 281–312.

[17] A. B. Newberg et al., "The Neuropsychological Correlates of Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness: Theory, Research and Practice*, 91–110.

[18] David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*, (ed. M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, and C. E. Thoresen; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, IL, 2002), 189–218.

[19] H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Conflict* (ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel; Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47; A. Haslam et al., "The Group as a Basis for Emergent Stereotype Consensus," *European Review of Social Psychology* 8 (1998): 203–39.

[20] M. A. Hogg, K. S. Fielding, and J. Darley, "Fringe Dwellers: Processes of Deviance and Marginalization in Groups," in *The Social Psychology of Inclusion and Exclusion* (ed. D. Abrams, M. A. Hogg, and J. M. Marques; New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 161–90.

[21] José M. Marques, Dominic Abrams, and Rui G. Serôdio, "Being Better by Being Right: Subjective Group Dynamics and Derogation of Ingroup Deviants When Generic Norms Are Undermined," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81 (2001): 436–47.

to find a realistic interpretation of the reality behind the text, even though the differentiation between habitual and non-habitual sin has little support in the rhetoric of the text itself. Although Westcott distorts the theological and rhetorical point that the text aims at, he is probably right in the sense that the real Johannine community excluded those who habitually deviated from group norms, but only after giving them chances to change their ways.[22]

Intentional and Unintentional Sins

A less common but still interesting interpretation, suggested by Johannes Heinrich August Ebrard in 1850, is that 1 John distinguishes between intentional and unintentional sin.[23] 1 John 3:6, 9 would then mean that they cannot sin intentionally, and 1:8–2:2 would mean that they should confess and be absolved from unintentional sins. Therefore, sins unto death and sins not unto death in 5:16 refer to intentional and unintentional sin, respectively. This interpretation is also supported by the distinction between intentional and unintentional transgressions in Jewish tradition (e.g., Lev. 4:13–14; Num. 15:27–31; 1QS VIII, 21–24; m. Ker. 1.2) and similar distinctions in Greco-Roman discussions on forensic rhetoric (e.g., Aristotle, *Rhet.* II.3; Cicero, *Inv.* II.5).[24] Nevertheless, there is no mention of intentional and unintentional sin in 1 John.

Ebrard's distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts speaks directly to how we humans tend to judge the moral value of other people's actions. Humans have a unique innate capacity to understand the motivation and knowledge behind other peoples' actions. This capacity is often called "theory of mind," since we are equipped with cognitive ability to "theorize" about (think about, imagine, have intuitions about) what is going on in other people's minds.[25] The process where we ascribe intentions, character traits, and motives to other people in order

[22] Practices of public confession (1:9) and intercession (5:16–17) were probably vital in these processes.

[23] Ebrard, *Biblical Commentary*, 226–228, 233–234. This interpretation has since been quite rare, see I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 226-28.

[24] Ebrard does not himself point out that the distinction between intentional and unintentional sin was important in Jewish halakha, but some later commentators do, e.g., Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 249–250; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC 51; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 297–298. However, Schnackenberg and Smalley rightly do not think that the text of 1 John supports the conclusion that the author has intentional sin in mind.

[25] Alan M. Leslie, "A Theory of Agency," in D. Sperber, D. Premack, and A. James Premack, *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 121–141.

to explain their actions is called "attribution" by social cognition scholars.[26] Jean Piaget, in his pioneering work on the child's development of morality, saw that as children mature, they develop their capacity to judge the moral value of an action depending on the agent's underlying motivations and intentions.[27] More recent cognitive studies on forgiveness show that adults are generally more willing to forgive those who wrong them if they believe that the offender did not do it intentionally.[28]

Therefore, although the author of 1 John does not theologize intentionality, it is quite reasonable that the members of the historical Johannine community shared our intuition that intentional transgressions are more serious than unintentional ones. The distinction is innate in the human mind, and it was a part of both Jewish, Greek and Roman moral discourse. We may assume that Ebrard, just like Westcott, was inspired by his moral intuitions in his interpretation.

Grave and Minor Sins

Some interpreters have suggested that 1 John intends to distinguish particularly grave sins, sins unto death, from other sins. 1:8–2:2 and 5:16–17 would then deal with less grave sins, but 3:6, 9 and 5:18 with sins so grave that it is impossible to "remain in him" (3:6). There is an abundance of suggestions as to which these sins are,[29] but most famous is perhaps the interpretation by Tertullian, who in the early third century suggested that "murder, idolatry, fraud, apostasy, blasphemy; and, of course, too, adultery and fornication" are sins unto death while other sins are forgivable (*On Modesty* 19).[30]

Tertullian's interpretation fits our general intuitions about how forgivable a transgression is. The experienced gravity of an offense is one of the factors that

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[26] Martha Augoustinos, Iain Walker, and Ngaire Donaghue, *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006), 149–185.

[27] Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgement of the Child* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932).

[28] Mullet and Michèle, "Developmental and Cognitive Points of View."

[29] Brown, *Epistles of John*, 615–617, for a survey.

[30] Cf. David M. Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16–17," *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, (ed. G. F. Hawthorne, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 230–246 (236–238). Cf. the Holiness Code, where sexual immorality (e.g., Lev. 18:24–30), idolatry (e.g., Lev. 19:31; 20:1–3) and bloodshed (e.g., Num 35:33–34) are considered particularly grave; see J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26–30.

affect how willingly people forgive.[31] That is perfectly rational, since if we estimate that cooperation with someone has been costly, we also project that it might become costly again in the future. It is no wonder that many interpreters have tried to resolve the tensions in 1 John by limiting forgiveness to less severe sins.

Tertullian's suggestion assumes a scenario of an individual before God. However, if we are to take the aim of 1 John – identity formation – seriously, gravity should be understood from a group perspective and not an individual perspective. We should look for transgressions that affect the identity of the whole group, not just the salvific status of the individual, and that is what we will do next.

Ingroup and Outgroup Sins

An interpretation, which appreciates the community building goal of 1 John, is that sins "unto death" are sins which cause exclusion from the community with God and thus also with the Johannine community. (The expression "passed from death to life," 3:14, describes the spiritual status of the community.) Many modern commentators since Robert Law's study *The Tests of Life,* published in 1909, have suggestions in this direction.[32] Such a definition is of course redundant unless the contents of the sins are elaborated. Some define the content of sin unto death in a very rigid manner, so that only the most vicious fit the criteria. Robert W. Yarbrough, for instance, defines sins unto death as having "a heart *unchanged* by God's love in Christ and so *persist* in [sinful] convictions and acts and commitments."[33] Collin G. Kruse suggests that the sins that a true community member cannot commit (3:9) equals ἀνομία in 3:4, which he understands as rebellion against God.[34] While such definitions may bring comfort to a worried soul, they do not appreciate how the text of 1 John describes sins that are signs of being "of the Devil" (3:8).

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[31] Mullet and Michèle, "Developmental and Cognitive Points of View." It should however be noted that the experienced severity of a transgression tends to affect the willingness to forgive less than for instance the degree of intentionality and repentance.

[32] Law, *Tests of Life*, 141, suggests that sins unto death are sins of those who "severed themselves from Christ *and from the Christian community*" (emphasis added). Similarly e.g., Brown, *Epistles of John,* 617–619; John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 317–320; Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without"; Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 297–299.

[33] Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 311, emphasis added. Similarly, Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Biblical Theology of the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 467–468.

[34] Colin G. Kruse, "Sin and Perfection in 1 John," *Australian Bible Review* 51 (2003): 60–70. Similarly, T. Griffith, "A Non-Polemical Reading."

David M. Scholer, in his essay from 1975, rightly summarizes the sins that are described by 1 John as sins which exclude you from "remaining" in the group in two categories: a) "murder," which equals hating other group members and not helping them (3:11–18), and b) "lying," that is, claiming a false Christology (2:22–23).[35] From an individualistic soteriological perspective, Scholer's understanding may be perceived as harsh, but from a group perspective, it is quite reasonable that hate, unhelpfulness and false teachings constituted the limit of group belonging. According to social identity theory (discussed above), groups tend to see transgressions that undermine the identity of the group as more severe than other transgressions. Group members who identify strongly with the group tend to act and interpret the social situation on the group level, so that the interests of the group are also the interests of the committed group member.[36] Severity is then understood from a group perspective, where the good of the group is the most important concern, not the good of individuals.

The two kinds of sin identified by Scholer are of highest concern from a group perspective. First, a group that appreciates "love" as an obligation to help each other in practical matters (3:17) would inspire cooperation and intimacy and thus strengthen the identity of the group. Second, in a group that is able to maintain a fairly coherent theological narrative, it is easier to maintain cognitive certainty among the group members. According to social identity theory, the sense that the group is distinct and has a purpose is very important in order to maintain commitment among the members of the group.[37] One important aspect of the group identity of the Johannine community was their theological narrative. When people in a group share similar narratives, they support each other emotionally and thus feel cognitively certain about the truth of these narratives. However, when some group members claim other narratives, this emotional support is weakened and cognitive uncertainty increases.[38] As a consequence, there is a risk that commitment to the group decreases. Therefore, from a group perspective it is quite understandable that alternative teachings that undermine cognitive certainty within the group would merit exclusion from the group. In short, both categories of sin identified

[35] Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without." His analysis is similar to Law, *Tests of Life*, who thinks that the three "tests" of a Christian in 1 John are practices of righteousness, love, and belief.

[36] Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory."

[37] Haslam et al., "The Group as a Basis."

[38] Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, Kurt W. Back., *Social Pressures in Informal Groups: A Study of Human Factors in Housing* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950); Serge Moscovici, *Social Influence and Social Change* (London: Academic Press, 1976).

by Scholer would weaken the group, and it is therefore in the interest of the community that these sins would merit reproach and, in some cases, even exclusion.

If we analyse the culture, or the identity, of the Johannine community from the perspective of the culture itself, rather than its members, we can view the culture a cognitive system that has to fulfil two conditions in order to survive. First, the culture must spread to new brains (evangelization). Second, the culture must have the capacity to protect itself from destruction. (The personification of culture is merely illustrative. A culture is, needless to say, not an intentional agent.) István Czachesz has used social network theory to show that one of the reasons early Christianity spread well was that its members were successful at creating "weak links," that is, contacts with people other than those with whom one interacts every day ("strong links," e.g., the household).[39] Through these weak links, the message of Christianity could spread into new contexts. However, Czachesz does not discuss the other side of the coin – that information potentially flows both ways through a social link.[40] Any social links could potentially influence group members in the wrong direction. I would suggest that the non-forgiveness of false teachers functions as a way to cut off potentially dangerous information flows from social links, and that non-forgiveness of unhelpful group members is a way to protect positive links within the community from destruction. In short, by claiming that God has no community with false teachers and those who destroy relations within the group, the culture and identity of the Johannine community became more apt for long term survival.

Sinlessness, yet Confession of Sins

There is a tension in 1 John between ideal and reality in the self-perception of the community. For example, all group members are described as characterized by love (1 John 4:19; 5:1). Only those who love and act accordingly remain group members

[39] Istvan Czachesz, "Women, Charity and Mobility in Early Christianity: Weak Links and the Historical Transformation of Religions," in *Changing Minds: Religion and Cognition through the Ages* (ed. I. Czachesz and T. Biró; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 129–154.

[40] Damon Centola and Michael Macy, "Complex Contagions and the Weakness of Long Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (2007): 702–734. Centola and Macy show that in cases of "complex contagion" where people typically need to be exposed to an idea repeatedly in order to become convinced, the number of people communicating the message to a person is of fundamental importance. The spread of costly and contested ideas such as Johannine beliefs are typically cases of complex contagion. From their analysis I conclude that cutting the amount of alternative information is of vital importance to maintain an idea within a group.

(2:10; 3:14; 4:12, 16; 5:2–3). Those who do not love other group members do not belong to the group (3:10, 14; 4:8, 11, 20). Yet love and its practical consequences are often described as an obligation rather than a fact (3:11, 16, 23; 4:21) and the text even directly exhorts the community to love (4:7[41]), thus implying that there is still need for moral improvement.

The claims of sinlessness in 1 John accentuate the tension between ideal and reality. The text claims that all group members are perfect and impeccable. Those who are born of God do not and cannot sin, since the seed of God is in them (3:6, 9; 5:18). In fact, those who fail to live up to the standards are by definition not group-members (2:4, 9, 11). When the text describes a group of people who apparently have left the community, the judgment is that they never belonged to the group, not even while they were in it (2:19). If being born of God causes a state of moral perfection (2:5; 4:14, 17–18), the only logical conclusion is that deviants could not even have entered that state.

Yet the text insists that group members who claim not to sin are liars (1:8–10). Everyone must confess their sins publicly,[42] and they are urged to pray for sinning group members (5:14–17). The contradiction is particularly accentuated in 5:16–18, where the instruction to pray for each other's sins stands right beside the claim of sinlessness.

Countless attempts have been made to solve this contradiction. After all, it is reasonable to assume that an author (or final redactor) clever enough to compose 1 John was also clever enough to understand that the text contains an apparent contradiction.[43] We may even assume that the author has a purpose in doing so. We will now evaluate these scholarly attempts in the light of research on forgiveness and identity formation.

Struggles Within

Alfred Plummer argues in his commentary from 1886 that the contradictions in 1 John merely reflect "that internal contradiction of which every one who is endeav-

[41] ἀγαπῶμεν in 4:7 may be understood as either indicative or subjunctive, but most translations assume that it is subjunctive.

[42] ὁμολογῶμεν in 1:9 probably refers to public confession, see Brown, *Epistles of John,* 208.

[43] Redactional theories (I. Howard Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 27–31, for an overview) may be used to explain the contradiction between 1:8–10; 5:16–17 and 3:6, 9; 5:18. However, even if the text has been redacted, the final redactor probably did not leave the text with a contradiction by stupidity or accident. Therefore, redactional theories cannot explain why the final redactor allowed the contradiction to stand. Cf. Udo Schnelle, *Die Johannesbriefe* (THKNT; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 180–181.

ouring to do right is conscious."[44] He then relies on Paul's description of a similar struggle in Rom 7:20 as a template to understand the tensions in 1 John. Further, Plummer thinks 1 John means that "the Divine nature imparted on the believer" is the entity that cannot sin.[45] Later commentators have not been impressed by this interpretation, since 1 John does not mention any struggle between flesh and Spirit within a person.[46]

Greek and Roman philosophers often conceptualized the inner life of a person as a struggle between different impulses. Plato postulated a tripartite soul (*The Republic* 436b); Aristotle discussed how rational thought and passions had to be coordinated in order to achieve virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1–10); Seneca regarded passions as destructive forces that reason had to conquer (*On Anger*). Some Jewish thinkers, for instance Philo (e.g., *The Decalogue* 142–153) and the author of 4 Maccabees (e.g., 3:2–5), had been impressed by Hellenistic thought on passions and rationality.[47] However, we must remember that not all Jews conceptualized the inner life of a person in this fashion. The traditional Jewish discourse on the inner life of a person was much more holistic and less precise.[48] 1 John surely knows how to talk about virtues (e.g., love, 3:10), knowledge (e.g., 2:3), emotions (e.g., fear, 4:18), spiritual influence (e.g., 3:6–10) and other attributes of the mind of humans as the cause of behaviour, but there is no developed concept of a struggle between different parts of this inner life in 1 John. One is either "of the Devil" or "of God" (3:8–9), but not simultaneously.[49]

Should we conclude that the real community members of 1 John did not experience a struggle between moral and immoral impulses, since we do not find this kind of vocabulary in the Johannine tradition? I think not. The last decades of research on the human brain have shown that the brain reacts subconsciously to social situations at several levels and creates a multitude of emotional and cognitive

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[44] Plummer, *Epistles of S. John*, 124.

[45] Plummer, *Epistles of S. John*, 127.

[46] E.g., Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 160–161.

[47] David E. Aune, "Mastery of the Passions: Philo, 4 Maccabees and Earliest Christianity," in *Hellenization Revisited: Shaping a Christian Response within the Greco-Roman World* (ed. W. E. Helleman; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 125–158.

[48] David Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man in Relation to its Judaic and Hellenistic Background* (London: Macmillan, 1956).

[49] Cf. 1QS III, 13–IV, 26. The parallel is not perfect, however, since 1QS IV, 23–24 mentions briefly that the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error struggles in man. Still, each individual is entirely dominated by one of the spirits and is not described as experiencing this struggle.

impulses, which it then has to coordinate.[50] It is part of our biology, not only of our culture, to coordinate contradicting impulses. Therefore, there is no reason to think that the brains of Johannine community members were any different in this regard. We may thus assume that the members of the real Johannine community experienced both moral and immoral impulses. They most probably interpreted the moral impulses as signs that "the seed of him [i.e., God] remains" (3:9) in them and caused them to act morally. If so, they were probably concerned about immoral impulses, since they implied that they were "in the dark" (2:11) and "of the Devil" (3:8). The complicated human process of making moral decisions was probably conceptualized as the difference between being influenced by the seed of God or not. Thus, Plummer's suggestion has a point. Nevertheless, his by all means correct description of the experience of being human cannot do justice to the way 3:6, 9 describes the condition of those born by God.

It is evident that Plummer is only concerned with the perspective of the individual when he discusses struggles within. He does not ask about the social function of the theology of forgiveness, although 1 John describes reality on the group level when it divides humanity into two categories. What social effects does it bring to associate deviant impulses and behaviours with being of the devil? We will return to this below.

Imperatives in Disguise

Georg Strecker resolves the tensions within 1 John in his commentary from 1989 by arguing that the statements about moral perfection in 1 John 3:6, 9 are meant to be a forceful way to urge the community to act morally – moral imperatives in indicative disguise.[51] He points out that the statements about perfection occur in the hortative context of 1 John 3, which indicates that the purpose of these statements is to set forth the ideal which the community should reach for. Moreover, the purpose of the letter, as expressed in 2:1, is to urge them not to sin. The obvious problem with this interpretation of 3:6, 9 is, of course, that the clauses are indicative, not imperative or hortative subjunctive.[52]

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[50] James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation," in *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd ed. (ed. M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones, and L. Feldman Barrett; New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 497–512.

[51] Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996; transl. of: *Die Johannesbriefe*, KEK 14; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 96–97, 102–103.

[52] Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John,* 161.

The indicative tense does not have to be such a decisive objection, though. The suggestion that the indicative has the rhetorical force of an imperative captures the conflation of causality and moral judgment in human attribution processes. A few illustrative examples: When Proverbs claims "The wise of heart heeds[53] commandments" (Prov 10:8), the statement about what the wise person is like is intended to exhort the reader to heed commandments. Epictetus introduces one of his discourses by defining a human as "a rational and mortal being" (Diatr. II.9). As the discourse continues, it becomes obvious that the statement that a human *is* rational, really functions as a statement about what a human ideally *should be*. Paul, too, uses this kind of rhetoric quite straightforwardly: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit" (Gal 5:25).

This conflation of indicative and imperative has to do with how processes of attribution (see discussion above) function in our minds. The statement in 1 John that "whoever is born of God does not commit sin" (3:9) is an attribution: The attribute "born of God" is imagined to cause the behaviour "does not commit sin." Now, in everyday life we use attribution processes not only to explain why people act in certain ways but also to judge the moral value of other people's actions. If we think that someone gives money out of love, we think it is good. If we believe money is given in order to manipulate and gain advantages, we judge the action as bad. Attributions are often done *ad hoc*; for instance, if someone crashes my car, I might be so upset that I refuse to accept that it was an accident and attribute evil intent to the person who caused the crash.[54] Since indicative attribution statements are simultaneously imperatives and moral judgments, indicative statements about the connection between attributes and actions can also be used rhetorically in order to convince people to act in certain ways, just like 1 John and many other ancient texts do.[55]

We may therefore assume that the first readers of 1 John were able to interpret these statements as statements about what they should be like, just like Strecker suggests. Nevertheless, to only emphasize the hortative function does not fully

[53] NRSV translates יִשְׁמַ֣ח "will heed," probably in order to capture that the Hebrew imperfect indicative can be used to express an intention or a wish, see Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed. (ed. and enlarged by E. Kautzsch; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), §107.4 (a).

[54] F. Cushman, J. Knobe, and W. Sinnott-Armstrong. "Moral Appraisals Affect Doing/Allowing Judgments," *Cognition* 108 (2008): 281–289; S. Nichols and J. Knobe. "Moral Responsibility and Determinism: The Cognitive Science of Folk Intuitions," *Noûs* 41 (2007): 663–685.

[55] R. Roitto, *Behaving as a Christ-Believer: A Cognitive Perspective on Identity and Behavior Norms in Ephesians* (ConBNT 46; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 74–106.

capture the flexible nature of attribution statements. In our minds, they function both as statements, ideals, and moral demands.[56]

Idealistic Versus Realistic Self-perception

Another interesting solution, suggested by Henry Alford in 1861, is that the claims about sinlessness are descriptions of an ideal, indeed a real spiritual state, while the exhortation to confess sins reflects the practical reality of the everyday struggle to remain in that state.[57] This solution was significantly developed in 1958 by Ignance de la Potterie, who suggests that the ideal is their spiritual potential, that which they are in the eyes of God.[58] The ideal is realized, yet eschatological; already now and still not yet.[59] Lyonnet shows how numerous Jewish texts expect perfection given by the Spirit in the eschatological future (e.g., *1 Enoch* 5:8; *Pss. Sol.* 17:32–33; *T. Levi* 18:9; *Jub.* 5:12; 1QS IV, 20–23; *4 Ezra* 9:31). There is an important difference in 1 John compared to most of these eschatological texts, however: In 1 John the eschatological expectation is not only future but also present.[60] "We have passed (μεταβεβήκαμεν) from death to life" (3:14; cf. John 3:18; 5:24; 8:51). Therefore, demand and realization stand side by side in 1 John.

Lyonnet is right in arguing that the realized eschatological framework in 1 John accentuates the tension between ideal and reality. However, this tension is not unique to groups with strong eschatological convictions. On the contrary, these tensions can be readily explained by how we humans conceptualize social identities. According to self-categorization theory, which is a development of social identity theory, we conceptualize social identities as categories.[61] We humans do not only think of categories as a number of elements which fulfil a number of minimal criteria. Most of the categories in our mind also have a prototype, that is, an idea

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[56] To be fair, Strecker, *The Johannine Letters*, 102–103, does write briefly that the statement in 3:9 is an ideal, although without coordinating it clearly with the hortative function.

[57] H. Alford, *The Greek Testament,* vol 4, 5th ed. (Boston, MA: Lee & Shepard, 1878; orig. ed. 1861), 465–470.

[58] I. de la Potterie, "The impeccability of the Christian According to 1 John 3, 6–9," in I. de la Potterie and S. Lyonnet, *Christian Lives by the Spirit* (New York: Alba House, 1971; transl. of: *La vie selon l'Esprit, condition du chrétien*, Paris, 1965), 175–196. The chapter originally appeared in: "L'impeccabilité du chrétien d'après I John 3,6–9," in *L'Evangile de Jean: Etudes et problèmes* (ed. M-É. Boismard; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1958), 161–177. (The preface of the English translation wrongly states that the chapter was written by Lyonnet.)

[59] 1 John clearly has an eschatological expectation (2:8, 17–18).

[60] Cf. S. Kubo, "1 John 3:9."

[61] John C. Turner et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

about the ideal or typical member of that category.[62] For example, we think of robins and sparrows as more prototypical birds than penguins. This is also true for social categories. Within social groups with a shared identity, there is a (more or less) shared imagination of the prototypical group member. This prototype is not merely the mean of all group members, but an ideal.[63] This ingroup prototype functions both at the group level and at the individual level. On the group level, the prototype is the group's shared imagination of what they are, and when they contrast themselves to other groups, they contrast the prototype with the stereotype of the outgroup. In this way, the ingroup prototype can be a source of collective self-esteem. When an individual group member identifies with a group, the prototype functions as an ideal self and the group member becomes motivated to act in a way that coheres with this prototype.[64] In this way the social identity prototype is both an indicative and an imperative. We can therefore assume that the idealistic descriptions of sinlessness in 3:6, 9; 5:18 are expressions of the group's identity prototype. This prototype is experienced both as a description of what the group is and as a prescription for group members.

As discussed above, most groups tolerate that group members deviate from the ingroup prototype to a certain extent, but when the deviation becomes a threat to the self-esteem, the distinctiveness, or the cooperation of the group, deviators are reproached, marginalized and perhaps even excluded from the group.[65] In this perspective, the rhetorical exaggeration in 3:9 is a problem, since it does not allow for any deviance from prototypical ideals at all.

I would like to suggest that the claim to incapability of sin in 3:9 has two simultaneous social effects. First, it creates a sense of superiority and distinctiveness in relation to other groups. As Judith Lieu has shown, 1 John forms the identity of the Johannine community by contrasting "us" to "them."[66] Second, the exaggeration in 3:9 functions as instrument of social control within the group. By claiming that group members are impeccable, it is *possible* for the socially influential to

[62] Eleanor Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," in *Cognition and Categorization* (ed. E. Rosch and B. B. Lloyd; Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1978), 27–48.

[63] Michael Hogg et al., "The Social Identity Perspective – Intergroup Relations, Self-Conception, and Small Groups," *Small Group Research* 35 (2004): 246–276.

[64] Bertjan Doojse, Naomi Ellemers, and Russell Spears, "Commitment and Intergroup Behaviour," in *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content* (ed. N. Ellemers, R. Spears, and B. Doojse; Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 84–106.

[65] See nn. 20 and 21.

[66] Judith Lieu, "Us or them? Persuasion and Identity in 1 John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008): 805–819.

marginalize others for just about any offence. We may assume that this did not happen most of the time (1:8–10; 5:15–17), but the imagination expressed in 3:9 made it possible. In other words, the claim to perfection maximized how flexibly the group could choose what should be considered a sin "unto death" (5:16–17). As Michael McCullough points out, religions (and other cultures) must be flexible in how they balance forgiveness and non-forgiveness in order to be able to handle all kinds of social situations.[67]

Rhetorical Exaggeration

Finally, we briefly consider a situational solution to the problem. In 1946 Charles Harold Dodd suggested that 1 John 1:8–2:2 and 3:1–10 fight two different heresies, one group who thinks they are immune to sin, and another who thinks that sin is not an issue any longer, since they are in a spiritual state.[68] This suggestion does not explain theologically why the author chooses to contradict himself. Rather, Dodd seems to imagine that the author is swept away by eagerness to counter heresies to the extent that he forgets to be consistent. "In combating [heresy], the author uses all the resources of antithesis to set forth the essential polarity of ethical religion."[69]

Although Dodd's suggestion might be too speculative, since he assumes two different opponents, he pinpoints an important group-dynamic insight: Groups tend to define themselves as the contrast of competing groups. In self-categorization theory (see above), this is called the "meta-contrast principle."[70] Since the purpose of the letter is to form the identity of the group, it is quite reasonable to appreciate that the letter contains a rhetoric that demarcates the group from those who do not belong to the group in order enhance the experience that the group is meaningful.

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[67] McCullough, *Beyond Revenge*, 220–223.

[68] Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 80–81. Dodd's suggestion has a precursor in Law, *Tests of Life*, 222–230, who argues that 1 John engages in polemic exaggeration in 3:6, 9.

[69] Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 80.

[70] Penelope J. Oakes, "The Categorization Process: Cognition of the Group in the Social Psychology of Stereotyping," in *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* (ed. D. Abrams and M. A. Hogg; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 28–47.

Concluding Proposal: Forgiveness and Sinlessness from a Group Perspective

In the final section of this chapter, I draw on the theory of cultural evolution to articulate a new proposal about the role of forgiveness in 1 John. Throughout the evaluation of different scholarly interpretations of forgiveness and sinlessness in 1 John, I have insisted that forgiveness is not only a matter between God and individuals in 1 John. Rather, forgiveness by God is integrated with community belonging and social identity formation. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the good of the group, particularly the good of the group's shared identity, defines the limit of forgiveness in 1 John. In other words, forgiveness is not only a matter of salvation, but also a matter of boundary maintenance in the community.

More precisely, 1 John's theology of forgiveness and non-forgiveness was instrumental in preservation of both a) the cognitive constructs (beliefs) that defined the identity of the group, b) and the real community, those who were bearers of this cognitive construct. By this suggestion, the culture of the Johannine community is analysed as the primary unit that is optimized for survival and the community members are understood as instrumental in the survival of this culture. This suggestion is counter-intuitive, since we are used to see it the other way around: The community should be seen as instrumental to the individual. However, by putting the culture of the group at the centre of our analysis, we arrive at a new understanding of the aim of the text, which is to form and maintain the identity of the community. David Sloan Wilson argues that evolutionary selection applies to cultures, not only to individuals. Some cultural patterns will be better at spreading and protecting themselves than others and will therefore be more widely distributed in a population.[71] He argues that how a culture handles forgiveness and punishment is of particular importance to a culture's fitness and that one of the most powerful advantages of Christianity throughout the centuries is the flexibility with which it has handled issues of forgiveness.[72]

Although we cannot know how successful the historical Johannine community was, we get the impression that 1 John was able to create a flexible balance between forgiveness and demands of good behaviour that enabled the community both to cooperate and to protect itself from destructive social forces. On the one hand, the community emphasized the possibility of forgiveness, which ensured continued cooperation. Those who were willing to confess their sins (1:8–2:2),

[71] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, e.g., 115–122.

[72] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral*, e.g., 189–218.

could continue to participate in the "fellowship" (κοινωνία, 1:7), and community members were encouraged to pray and thus mediate God's forgiveness (5:14–17). On the other hand, the community limited forgiveness, so that behaviours that undermined the continuity and meaning of the community were not accepted. Those who undermined the cognitive certainty of the community's faith in Christ were marginalized, just like those who did not practice love and did not help those in need. The contradiction in 1 John is a rhetorically skilful way to express this balance.[73]

Yet that is not all. The contradiction has other important social functions, as well. Claiming sinlessness as their true identity, as unrealistic as it is, has several group dynamic effects. First, it creates a positive social identity, which gives both self-esteem and distinctiveness in relation to competing groups. Second, it functions as an imperative ideal to strive for. Third, claiming that true group members are sinless, while at the same time holding on to the possibility of forgiveness, creates flexibility in the limits of group belonging, which is necessary for long term thriving.

In conclusion, there is good reason to think that 1 John, precisely through its contradictory statements, created a culture of forgiveness and non-forgiveness that was beneficial for the continuity of the community. We may therefore suspect that whoever wrote 1 John was sensitive to the complex needs of the Johannine community when he wrote the way he did. The theology of forgiveness in 1 John may be frustrating if we treat it as a theological system, but if we think of theology as a way to enable sharing of religious life and identity in a community, we can appreciate how 1 John manages to achieve just that with its inconsistent theology.

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[73] Cf. m. Avot. 3.16: "The world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the excess of works."

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