

TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

“MATTHEAN EXILIC FORGIVENESS”

[A Study of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant]
- Matthew 18:21-35 -

STUDENT: LOBO ANTHONY CLIFFORD, S.D.B.

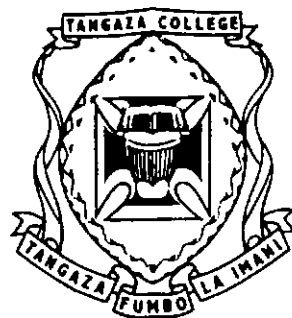
TUTOR: REV.FR. IZZO DOMINIC, O.P.

FEBRUARY, 2002

NAIROBI - KENYA

TANGAZA COLLEGE

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa



Guidelines for Reading and Assessing the Long Essay

While reading and assessing a Long Essay, you are requested to follow these guidelines.

1. Content

This includes an assessment of the quality of

- a. The scientific soundness of information, statements and Christian Doctrine.
- b. The logic of the argumentation and development of ideas.
- c. The appeal of the thesis.
- d. The conclusions drawn.

(This should have a weighting of 32 marks)

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This includes an evaluation of

- a. The range of reading and the current nature of the reading
- b. The depth of the research.
- c. The understanding of the research and its appropriateness
- d. The way in which the sources were used.

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This includes an evaluation of

- a. The standard of English – sentence structure, paragraphing etc.
- b. The format of presentation – Headings, Table of Contents
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This includes an evaluation of

- a. Personalised integration of material
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Note that the total available mark is 80

Tim Redmond
Director of the Theology Programme

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- Matthew 18:21-35 -**

**A LONG ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN
RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

STUDENT: LOBO ANTHONY CLIFFORD, S.D.B.

TUTOR: REV.FR. IZZO DOMINIC, O.P.

FEBRUARY, 2002

NAIROBI - KENYA

DEDICATION

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

The law an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.



Mahatma Gandhi

PRAYER

Father, I thank you for forgiving me all my sins and for cleansing me from all unrighteousness. I acknowledge that you did not overlook my sin, but that you accepted Jesus' death on the cross as payment in full for the moral debt I owed you.

Thank you Lord Jesus for dying in my place! Now I am faced with the responsibility of forgiving those who have sinned against me. I ask that you fill my heart with love and empathy for the one who has chosen to be my enemy. In this moment I choose to release them from any and all moral debt they owe me. I forgive them for _ _ _ . I declare that your death on the cross evens the account and more than adequately nullifies what they owe me. I choose to do good to them and to promote the reconciliation of our relationship and the restoration of trust in the place where they violated me. I renounce resentment, hatred, and bitterness and embrace your healing touch. I refuse to allow past hurts to enslave me and wall me in. I choose to pursue wholeness and to find a way to evidence that wholeness to the one who has trespassed against me. I trust you to take me beyond myself into your loving compassion for others. I set aside my rights and esteem the need of my offender as more important than my own. I choose to see them as you see them and I ask you to forgive them. I pray that you will bind us together in Christian love that we may be a testimony of your mighty power and a trophy of your grace.

In Jesus name, let it be!

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method, and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit.

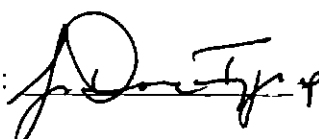
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SIGNED:  _____

NAME of the STUDENT: LOBO ANTHONY CLIFFORD

DATE: 07/02/2002

This Long Essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

SIGNED:  _____

NAME of the SUPERVISOR: REV. FR. IZZO DOMINIC, OP

DATE: 07/02/2002

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	-	Anchor Bible
ABD	-	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BAGD-		Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the NT</i>
BDB	-	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the OT</i>
BibRev-		<i>Bible Review</i>
BTB	-	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
CBQ	-	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DBT	-	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i>
DJG	-	A Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels
EBC	-	<i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
EDNT-		<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
HBC	-	<i>Harper's Bible Commentary</i>
HeyJ	-	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
IB	-	<i>The Interpreter's Bible</i>
ICC	-	International Critical Commentary
Int	-	<i>Interpretation</i>
JBC	-	<i>The Jerome Biblical Commentary</i>
JBL	-	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSNT	-	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSOT	-	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JTS	-	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
NAB	-	New American Bible
NBC	-	<i>The New Bible Commentary</i>
NBD	-	<i>The New Bible Dictionary</i>
NICNT-		New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT-		New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDNTT -		<i>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
IDOTTE-		<i>The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NJBC	-	<i>The New Jerome Biblical Commentary</i>
NovT	-	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	-	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	-	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
TBT	-	<i>The Bible Today</i>
TDNT	-	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TDOT	-	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TToday-		<i>Theology Today</i>
WBC	-	Word Biblical Commentary

OLD TESTAMENT

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
1 Kgs	1 Kings
2 Kgs	2 Kings
1 Chr	1 Chronicles
2 Chr	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Tob	Tobit
Est	Esther
Job	Job
Ps(s)	Psalms(s)
Prov	Proverbs
Ecc1	Ecclesiastes
Cant	Song of Songs (Canticles)
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon
Sir	Ecclesiasticus/Ben-Sira
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations of Jeremiah
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

NEW TESTAMENT

Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
1 Jn	1 John
2 Jn	2 John
3 Jn	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	The Revelation to John (Apocalypse)

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INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness is an important issue in any community. It was, perhaps, more important in the society of Second-Temple Judaism than in many others. This concept was so important that much of Jesus' work could be characterized as focusing on the offering of God's forgiveness.

For Matthew, God's offer of forgiveness comes through Jesus and is a very important concept in the understanding of his gospel. This is shown by Matthew's statements as to why Jesus came and died, and by the implications which follow from the destruction of the temple.

At the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the writer states that an angel came and told Joseph that a son was to be born and that "he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). This saving of his people from sin is a clear foreshadowing of the forgiveness that Jesus would offer to those who would follow him. This foreshadowing is more clearly brought out in 26:28 where Jesus says, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins". Thus, at the beginning and near the end of his gospel, Matthew states that Jesus came and died for the purpose of the forgiveness of sin. To these specific statements about the purpose of Jesus' arrival and death must be added the tension that was felt by the Jewish population at the destruction of the temple. Whether Matthew is writing after the destruction of the temple or not,¹ many of those reading the gospel are reading it after this event and thus feel the tension that exists as a result of having to rethink their methods for gaining atonement and achieving forgiveness. They no longer have the physical, national symbol of God's offer of forgiveness. It has been destroyed. Now the first-century Jew must reconsider how it is that

¹ For questions about the dating of Matthew's gospel see W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Vol. I, ed. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 127-136; Donald A. Hagner, Matthew 1-13, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 33a, ed. Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word, 1995), 1:125-27.

he/she finds the forgiveness of God. When read in this context, Matthew's focus on forgiveness becomes even more important.

This essay will deal with one small story of forgiveness that Jesus told. The story is called the 'Parable of the unforgiving servant' (sometimes called the unthankful servant) and is found in Matthew 18:21-35. The parable deals with the question of forgiveness from the standpoint of a monetary debt that was owed and then forgiven. This story, along with the other passages in which Matthew speaks of forgiveness, is critical for a proper understanding of the Gospel and its view of forgiveness. A reading of the parable of the unforgiving servant raises a number of exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological issues. The study will attempt a detailed exegesis of the parable in an effort to understand what a first-century Jew would have thought upon hearing this story.

Many "modern views are ... guided by a second-century interpretation of Matthew rather than by what the gospel narrative means in a first-century Jewish context."² Thus most important for this essay will be N. T. Wright's work, Jesus and the Victory of God,³ where he argues that forgiveness is inextricably linked with a return from exile. An examination of Second-Temple Judaism's view of exile and its links to the exilic hope of final forgiveness, will add significantly to a proper understanding of this parable and a proper understanding of the gospel's view of forgiveness.

² A. J. Saldarani, Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 15.

³ N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996).

Thesis of the Essay:

In our examination of the parable, we will attempt to prove the following:

A study of the 'Parable of the Unforgiving Servant' in the context of forgiveness in first-century Judaism will show that God's offer of forgiveness, extended through Jesus, realizes the exilic hope of final forgiveness; the parable, which may have been directed against the Jewish leaders, shows that whoever fought against the forgiveness offered to sinners through Jesus also fought against an end to the exile.

The rest of the essay will proceed along these lines in attempting to prove the above thesis: In the first chapter, we will deal with the question of the link between sin, exile and forgiveness. Here we will examine the link as it is seen in the Hebrew bible. Chapter two will examine the words and actions of Jesus in an effort to determine any exilic links in his mission. Here some important Matthean passages will be examined in an attempt to discover whether or not a link between exile and forgiveness exists. The third chapter will highlight important themes that contributed to Matthew's use of the parable of the unforgiving servant. This section will include both a close examination and exegesis of the parable and an attempt to set the parable in the context of the Matthean view of the relationship between forgiveness and exile. The fourth chapter will conclude with reflections on a Christian view of forgiveness.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SIN, EXILE AND FORGIVENESS IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

One might ask what the concept of exile has to do with the nature of forgiveness. Here we will examine the connection between exile and forgiveness as seen in the Hebrew Bible.

1.1 The Connection Between Exile And Forgiveness

Wright points out that to the extent that sin caused the exile, then forgiveness was what was needed to end it. If a first century Jew still considered him/herself to be living in exile, then he/she, of necessity, considered him/herself unforgiven.⁴ Thus if Israel's exile were to end,⁵ it would mean that the sin which brought her there was no longer being punished because it had been forgiven. If many first-century Jews did consider themselves to be in exile, then Jesus' offer of forgiveness can be seen as an offer to bring an end to the exile.

1.1.1 The Definition of Exile

VanderKam lays out several possible definitions for the term exile.⁶

1. Exile is often seen as a covenantal or prophetic threat for those who disobey the covenantal commands of God (See for example Deut. 4:23-28; Jer. 25:11).

⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 268, where he states very starkly, "Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying 'return from exile'."

⁵ We use the term "Israel" generically to indicate God's chosen people. When necessary or significant we will differentiate between Israel and Judah.

⁶ J. C. VanderKam, "Exile in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. J. M. Scott (Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 90.

2. Exile can also refer to a historical experience, which began at different times for different Jewish groups.

3. Exile may be seen as an ongoing, and still unfinished experience. In this sense, captivity continues for those who have returned to the land as well as for those who have remained in other lands.

For this essay, “end of the exile” or “restoration from exile” will be taken to mean the hope of Second-Temple Jews that God was going to intervene and do three things: fulfill the prophecies which were seen by many as referring to the return from exile; forgive the sin that sent Israel into exile; and return to his temple.⁷ These three Jewish expectations will be examined in the Hebrew Bible for two reasons. First, this examination hopes to prove that this was the expectation of a number of Jews in first-century Israel. Furthermore, the essay will add further proof to Wright’s argument, that if these three things would indicate an end to the exile (in the above senses of the word) then until God’s offer of forgiveness through Jesus was accepted, the exile still continued.⁸ Before embarking upon this examination, however, a preliminary question must be asked: “What was it that sent Israel into exile?”

⁷ We are not arguing here that this is the only possible or even necessarily the dominant understanding of the term exile.

⁸ It might be argued here that we are committing the logical fallacy described by James Barr, i.e., “illegitimate totality transfer” (*The Semantics of Biblical Language* [London: SCM Press, 1961], 218). In essence the fallacy is that of bringing every meaning of a word into a particular use of that word. For example while the word “trunk” can mean the back of a car, a suitcase, a person’s body, a tree’s main section or an elephant’s nose, it cannot mean all of these things at the same time. To transfer all of these meanings into any particular use of a word is to engage in “illegitimate totality transfer,” that is, transferring in all of the meanings to one use of the word.

The reason for particular caution in this essay has to do with the use of the words exile and forgiveness. Both of these terms are large and filled with much theological content and one must be careful not to transfer all of that content into any one use of the word. How might this fallacy be avoided? First it must be understood that virtually everyone who reads the New Testament commits some transfer of meaning. No one who has read the Hebrew Bible comes to the term Messiah, covenant, or redemption without some pre-conceived notion of what these terms are to signify. Second we are making an attempt to narrow, not widen the definition of exile and therefore we cannot be guilty of “illegitimate totality transfer.” Thus we would argue that this transfer is not total. That is, we do not seek to transfer every meaning of “exile” or every meaning of “forgiveness” into a particular use of the word.

1.1.2 Forgiveness and Exile in The Old Testament

Here we will focus on two specific questions: What caused the exile, and what are the links between that cause and forgiveness?

1.1.2.1 Punishment for Sin as the Cause of the Exile

The breaking of God's covenant caused exile. This may take the form of idolatry, or some other covenant-breaking activity, but all of the activities fall under the general heading of sin. In fact, seeing sin as having caused some form of exile seems fairly obvious, and is a motif that is seen throughout the entire Hebrew Bible.⁹ Numerous modern writers have pointed out this connection.¹⁰ However, in the interest of completeness, the cause for the exile will quickly be examined by looking at the Book of Deuteronomy, which seems to clearly point out sin as the cause. This is by no means a complete list of the passages.

1.1.2.2 Deuteronomy 28:47- 48

“(47) Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things; (48) therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD shall send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things: and He will put an iron yoke on your neck until He has destroyed you.”

This chapter in Deuteronomy begins with the promise of blessings for obedience. These blessings are very similar to the promises that the first-century C.E. exiles echo and cling to. Promises are not all that are offered in the passage, however. In fact, “the specifics are much

⁹ Adam and Eve for example, after sinning, being exiled from the garden; Cain after killing Abel being exiled from the land; Israel after following other gods, being exiled to Egypt, etc.

¹⁰ See B. Halpern-Amaru, “Exile and Return in Jubilees,” in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. J. M. Scott (Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 138, n. 126; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 106; J. M. Scott, “Exile and the Self-Understanding of Diaspora Jews in the Greco-Roman Period,” in *Exile* 175-6; VanderKam, in *Exile*, 89.

more heavily [weighted] in terms of the negative consequences of disobedience than the positive results of obedience.”¹¹ The passage, having begun with promises of blessings, then continues on to the verses quoted above in which the readers are told that if they fail to obey the Lord they will be in subjection to another nation.

Deuteronomy 28 very clearly indicates that God would punish those who broke his covenant by allowing the enemies of Israel to rule them. The exile, whether it be Babylonian (much of this passage may be seen as events that “did in fact happen to the nation of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians”¹²) or some other, was in large part heinous because the enemies were allowed control over them.¹³ In fact, many still considered themselves to be in exile, precisely because they were still controlled by the Roman government.

The punishment for the failure to serve the true God is laid out very specifically, but could be stated in just one word, “exile.” What is significant about the setting forth of the specifics of exile is that the sin which led to these events, serves to give a “theological rationale to the disasters that came upon the people . . . What one hears in Deuteronomy is the claim that they [the disasters] grew out of the choices and actions of the people.”¹⁴

It is clear then, that those who had “rejected God’s love, . . . would be assigned once again to serve an enemy.”¹⁵ The term “iron yoke,” found in v. 48, is a metaphor often used to picture those who are in service to other nations. It is used in Lev 26:13 as a symbol of the bonds of Egypt. It is also used in Jer 28:14 where the nations are said to have been yoked to the

¹¹ P. D. Miller, Deuteronomy, (Interpretation Series; Philadelphia: John Knox, 1990), 193.

¹² Ibid., 197.

¹³ On the social impact of the Babylonian exile see D. Smith-Christopher, “Reassessing the Historical and Sociological Impact of the Babylonian Exile (597/87-539 B.C.E.),” in Exile, esp. 23-25.

¹⁴ Miller, Deuteronomy, 194.

¹⁵ P. C. Craigie, The Book of Deuteronomy, (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 348.

king of Babylon. Thus even those who had not disobeyed individually would be punished corporately.

Is this theme continued in other passages in Deuteronomy? The answer is an unqualified yes. There are many other passages in the book, which clearly point to sin as a cause of exile. However, only one more will be mentioned.

1.1.2.3 Deuteronomy 29:22-29

In Deuteronomy 29:22-29 the readers are reminded of the events that are to happen in this coming time of calamity. The events are so terrible that people will ask themselves and others what the nation of Israel did to deserve such a terrible fate. Once again (just as above), we see the writer's need for some sort of theological justification for the exile. The justification is found in vv. 25-26.

(25) Then men shall say, 'Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt.
(26) And they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they have not known and whom He had not allotted to them.'

Thus the horrible consequences spoken of in vv. 22-24 have come upon the land not because of war, but ultimately because of disobedience to God's covenant. "The curse not only brought devastation to the land, but the people went into exile - *he threw them into another land.*"¹⁶

This passage again makes what may be an obvious point. Those who sin by worshipping other gods will be punished by being forced to serve other people.

Thus in the Hebrew Bible, the link between serving other nations (in exile), and punishment for sin is forged. This link continues in other types of literature. Both the Apostle

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

Paul,¹⁷ and the Book of Tobit,¹⁸ for example, seem to echo this passage as well as this principle of sin leading to exile. There are many other passages in the Book of Deuteronomy which also seem to echo this same sentiment.¹⁹

Various writers of the Old Testament, writing at different times saw Israel's exile as a punishment for sin, and so what was needed to end the exile was God's forgiveness.²⁰ Thus "repentance" in a good many texts, was what Israel must do if her exile is to come to an end.²¹ So, when Israel was brought back from exile, she was forgiven. This forgiveness was not so much for an individual but for the nation. Wright states that this needs to be,

"emphasized in the strongest possible terms: the most natural meaning of the phrase 'the forgiveness of sins' to a first-century Jew is not in the first instance the remission of individual sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins. And since the exile was the punishment for those sins, the only sure sign that the sins had been forgiven would be the clear and certain liberation from exile."²²

Sanders also points out that one of the "themes of passages in Jewish literature which look forward to the restoration of Israel is the need for repentance."²³ Thus repentance, which leads to forgiveness, was seen not just as an individual act, but also as a national act.

The above evidence shows that the exile was seen by those first-century Jews who read the Hebrew Bible, as having been caused by sin, and thus forgiveness as what is needed to bring it to an end.

¹⁷ See James M. Scott, "Paul's use of the Deuteronomic Tradition" in *JBL* 112 (1993), 645-665.

¹⁸ Steven Weitzman, "Allusion, Artifice, and Exile in the Hymn of Tobit," in *JBL* 115 (1996), 49-61.

¹⁹ See for example 6:14; 7:4; 11:16; 31:16.

²⁰ See Isaiah 8 where the prophet speaks of a remnant returning.

²¹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 248.

²² *Ibid.*, 273.

²³ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 106.

CHAPTER TWO
A LOOK AT FORGIVENESS AND EXILE IN SOME PASSAGES OF
MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

It will be the purpose of this chapter to review some important Matthean passages. It should be noted here that no attempt would be made to exegete these passages completely or fully. The passages will simply be examined in an attempt to find a relationship (should one exist) between the passage and the link between forgiveness and exile.

The Statistics of the word 'forgive'

The word which is translated 'forgive' (ἄφεσις) occurs 47 times in Matthew. This is more than any in other book of the NT and there is a much higher occurrence in Matthew than the other synoptics. However, not all of these uses carry the meaning 'to forgive.' The verb can have meanings as broad as to let go; to send away, to remit, cancel or pardon; to leave; and to tolerate.²⁴ Of these 47 uses in Matthew, 17 have the meaning of 'forgive' or 'pardon' (Mt. 6:12 (*twice*), 14 (*twice*), 15 (*twice*); 9:2, 5, 6; 12:31 (*twice*), 32 (*twice*); 18:21, 27, 32, 35). There is also one use of the noun form of the word in 26:28. We hold that these passages are the most important because they are passages where Matthew explicitly (rather than implicitly) speaks about forgiveness. Thus the decision to exclude some passages has been made not just because of space constraints, but based on the external criteria of the specific nature of Matthew's writing of forgiveness.

²⁴ BAGD, 125b. See also Bultmann in TDNT I, 509-513.

A Setting Forth of the Important Passages

We will highlight some of the above-mentioned passages along with Matthew's statement of Jesus' mission in order to see the link between forgiveness, exile and restoration. In Matt 1:21 we see Matthew's statement of Jesus' mission. The question that we will seek to answer, is whether Jesus, as he is presented in Matthew, saw his mission as fulfilling this hope or perhaps simply announcing it.

Early in chapter nine Christ forgives the lame man by saying to him “ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι.” (Mat 9:2) Then to prove that the lame man is forgiven, he offers him physical healing. This is one of the two cases in the New Testament “when Jesus explicitly forgives someone's sin” (the other occasion is found in Luke 7:48).²⁵ The third passage is that of the unforgivable sin which is mentioned in 12:31-32. The fourth passage that will be examined is, in which the noun version of the word is used, occurs in the context of the “last supper.” It is here in Matt 26:28 that Jesus says, “τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν” This, as we will see, is a very significant passage in the understanding of our overall thesis. The relationship between the Passover meal, exile, and forgiveness is very strong.

2.1 Matthew's Statement Of Jesus' Mission

In 1:21, Matthew says this about the mission of Jesus:

τέξεται δὲ υἱὸν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν· αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν.

In this passage Matthew defines the name of Jesus as one who will save his people from their sins. Jesus offers the forgiveness of God. Thus “everything that he does in the gospel must

²⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I: 89.

be understood ultimately in the light of that saving purpose.”²⁶ There are at least three reasons for seeing this passage speaking of the restoration of Israel and thus the end of the exile. They are the context of the passage, the use of the term σωζω and the use of the term ἀμαρτιῶν.

2.1.1 The Context of the Passage

The context of this passage is clearly exilic. This text occurs in the first chapter of Matthew following the genealogy. Matthew, like other genealogical writers of his time, has written with theological ends in mind.²⁷ He has divided the descendants of Jesus into three groups of fourteen. Davies and Allison point out that this is significant and that the very design of the genealogy seeks to show that Jesus was born at precisely the correct time in history. They argue that the apocalypses of Judaism place,

“ The epoch of the exile immediately before the epoch of redemption. This is significant because Mt. 1: 2-17 divides history in periods and places the appearance of Jesus at the end of the exilic era. So the time of the Messiah’s birth admirably falls in line with a presumably common eschatological calendar.”²⁸

Brown cites even more evidence in favor of this reading. He believes that the “Matthean genealogy may have been intended to suggest that the exile did not really come to an end until the appearance of Jesus, the Davidic Messiah.”²⁹ The very context of Matthew’s first statement about Jesus’ name indicates that Jesus has come to offer an end to the exile through the offer of God’s forgiveness.

²⁶ D. R. Bauer, “The Kingship of Jesus in the Matthean Infancy Narrative: A Literary Analysis,” in *CBO* 57 (1995), 310.

²⁷ See D. S. Huffinan, “Genealogy” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J.B. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 255.

²⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:187.

²⁹ R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 81.

It seems as if Wright is correct when he argues that this statement (v.21) by Matthew presupposes the story of the exile.³⁰ Without that story, this announcement by Matthew is incomplete. Thus, the context of this verse, which has been called the programmatic statement of Matthew's gospel,³¹ almost demands that the reader understand that the exile is ongoing, and that Jesus' offer of forgiveness is an offer of restoration from exile.

2.1.2 Matthew's Use of the Term *σώζω* and *ἁμαρτιῶν*

The second link to restoration in this passage is contained in the verb *σώσει*.³² Matthew states that Jesus will save his people from their sin. The verb *σώζω* is used 13 times by Matthew, often as a Matthean redaction.³³

While the restoration spoken of in 1:21 does indeed have eschatological implications, the point is that if Israel repents and accepts Jesus' offer of forgiveness, they will become again what they once were, a people of God who are no longer living in exile.

The third link to exile in Matt 1:21 comes from the word *ἁμαρτιῶν*. We saw that the primary cause of exile was sin. Thus, if restoration is to take place it will be because sin has been forgiven. When Matthew says that Jesus is going to save his people from their sins, the natural expectation from those who knew of this association between exile and sin (i.e., those who knew the Hebrew Bible) would be an end to the exile and thus an end to Roman dominance. Many first-century Jews would have expected this salvation to bring freedom from Roman

³⁰ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 385. See also *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 561.

³¹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 384.

³² On this verb see BAGD 798; TDNT 8:965-1003.

³³ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 3:474.

dominance and a restoration of the people of God.³⁴ It is from this bondage (and thus from the exile connected with it) that Jesus will save his people.

2.2 Jesus' Choice of the Twelve

One of the strongest pieces of evidence in favor of the fact that Matthew saw Jesus' mission as bringing an end to the exile is in his choice of the twelve. The query of course, if one accepts the historical reliability of the tradition of the choice of the twelve, is the question of Jesus' motivation for such an action. Why would he have chosen twelve disciples?

The fact that the number is not accidental is shown first by the fact that Jesus had, at least at times, many more followers than twelve (see for example Luke 10:1). Secondly, the fact that this group is often referred to as simply, "the twelve" (see for example Matt. 26:14, 20, 47) indicates, in some sense at least, the importance of this particular number. The number comes to symbolize who these men are. The term is not, as Jeremias points out, "a purely numerical designation of twelve individual personalities, but signified the group of the representatives of the twelve tribes in the end time".³⁵

Thirdly, many scholars agree that this number twelve was a specific attempt by Jesus to point to the regathering and restoration of the nation of Israel.³⁶ When Jesus chose the twelve, he was indicating that the restoration of Israel was at hand. Thus the choice of the twelve is the symbolic beginning of that restoration process.

³⁴ See Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 33a, ed. Ralph P. Martin (Dallas: Word, 1995), 1:1.

³⁵ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, (SCM Press Ltd: London, 1971), 234.

³⁶ See for example Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 11:151, "They . . . represent the twelve tribes of Israel"; R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 176, "the number twelve was chosen as a deliberate reference to the twelve tribes of Israel"; Hagner, *Matthew*, 1:265, "The choice of the twelve disciples is full of symbolic meaning since the number corresponds to the twelve tribes of Israel"; R. Mounce, "Matthew" in *New International Biblical Commentary*, Ed. W. W. Gasque, Peabody, (MA: Hindrickson, 1991), 90, "they [the 12 disciples] represent the new Israel: the twelve tribes of Israel find their counterpart in the twelve disciples".

Thus if the above analysis of the mission of Jesus is correct, then any passage that deals with the forgiveness offered by Jesus in the gospel of Matthew might have the theme of the restoration from exile in the background. Some passages will now be examined in an effort to determine whether or not this theme is actually there.

2.3 Matthew 9:2-6

(2) καὶ ἰδοὺ προσέφερον αὐτῷ παραλυτικὸν ἐπὶ κλίνης βεβλημένον. καὶ ἰδὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὴν πίστιν αὐτῶν εἶπεν τῷ παραλυτικῷ, Θάρσει, τέκνον, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι. (3) καὶ ἰδοὺ τινες τῶν γραμματέων εἶπαν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, Οὗτος βλασφημεῖ. (4) καὶ ἰδὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὰς ἐνθυμήσεις αὐτῶν εἶπεν, Ἵνατί ἐνθυμείσθε πονηρὰ ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν; (5) τί γάρ ἐστιν εὐκοπώτερον, εἰπεῖν, Ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, ἢ εἰπεῖν, Ἐγείρε καὶ περιπάτει; (6) ἵνα δὲ εἰδῆτε ὅτι ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας τότε λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ, Ἐγερθεὶς ἄρον σου τὴν κλίνην καὶ ὑπάγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου.

This is the one of the passages which deals with forgiveness in the gospel. It follows on the heels of several other miracle stories.³⁷ Let us look briefly at the related themes of forgiveness and healing.

2.3.1 Healing and Exile

The exilic theme of healing is a very important. There are a variety of sub-topics that are important: the link between sin and sickness; healing as a sign of the forgiveness of sin; as well as the relationship between certain types of sickness and personal exile from the community.

³⁷ 8:1-4 tell of the healing of leprosy; 8:5-13 the healing of the centurion's daughter; 8:14-17 the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, as well as many others.

2.3.1.1 The Relationship Between Sin and Sickness

There was an understanding by many Second-Temple Jews that sin would ultimately lead to sickness and perhaps death.³⁸ This understanding had likely come from a variety of texts.³⁹ Matthew has in this chapter placed a great deal of emphasis on Jesus' ability to heal as well as explicitly speaking of Jesus' ability to offer God's forgiveness.⁴⁰ Jesus, in this case, has not "simply announced God's forgiveness but has acted in God's place by himself forgiving the man's sins."⁴¹ Note, however, that the man who is healed apparently does nothing, and the others in the crowd do not thank Jesus, but "praise God from whom health comes."⁴² It seems to be only the Jewish leadership who are offended by the offer of forgiveness that Jesus brings.

2.3.1.2 Healing as a Sign of Forgiveness

This healing was a physical sign that the forgiveness of sin had taken place. The question that Jesus asks as to which is easier, assumes that it is more difficult to offer a word of healing than to offer a word of forgiveness, presumably because the effect of a word of healing is so obvious: either it works or it does not.⁴³

³⁸ On this issue see France, *Matthew*, 165; and B. J. Malina and R. L. Rohrbaugh, *A Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 81.

³⁹ See for example Ex. 20:5 which shows that punishment for the father's sin could be brought upon children for many generations; Lev. 26:16 which threatens diseases, blindness and eventual death to those who disobey the commands of God; Deut. 28:27-28 promises boils, tumors, festering sores, madness and blindness.

⁴⁰ Note that Matthew has several healing stories both before and after this pericope, as well as quoting Isaiah 53 to prove the messianic nature of what Jesus was doing.

⁴¹ G. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 116.

⁴² B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 99.

⁴³ Twelftree traces this idea back to Chrysostom in *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 116-17, and offers some other alternatives as well.

2.3.1.3 Sickness and Personal Exile⁴⁴

A third subsection, which deals with the nature of healing and exile, rests in the fact that certain types of both sin and sickness led to a personal exile from the community. This is seen very clearly in this section of Matthew. It is here that the outcasts or the outsiders respond positively to Jesus. The Jewish leaders however do not respond positively. In fact, each of the stories in this section of Matthew (8:23-9:8) “draws special attention to Jesus and the response to his miracles.”⁴⁵ One of the clear themes of the miracle stories contained in this section, “Is that Jesus responds to the sick out of mercy” (see 9:22, 27, and especially 9:36).⁴⁶ This showing of mercy is what was expected of the one who would bring an end to the exile.

2.4 Matthew 12:31-32

(31) Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πᾶσα ἁμαρτία καὶ βλασφημία ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἡ δὲ τοῦ πνεύματος βλασφημία οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται. (32) καὶ ὃς ἂν εἴπῃ λόγον κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου, οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ οὔτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

This is another passage that deals with forgiveness in Matthew's gospel. It occurs in the midst of a variety of controversy. There is controversy over the Sabbath in the pericope preceding the one in question, and controversy over the sign of Jonah, as well as familial relations after the unforgivable sin logion. There seem to be several links to exile in the context of this passage: the controversy with the Pharisees; the quotation of Isaiah 42; and the unforgivable sin in Jewish literature.

⁴⁴ Note that whenever we speak of “personal exile” we use it as a metaphor for what had and was happening to the nation of Israel.

⁴⁵ Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, 117.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

2.4.1 The Controversy with the Pharisees and Exile

It seems that Matthew needs a foil for his exilic theology. This foil is a person, or group of people, who simply will not accept the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, and that he is bringing an end to the exile. Matthew recognizes such a group in the Jewish leadership of his day. We see the number of times that they have rejected, or set out to trap Jesus. "There have always been competing assessments of Jesus and his significance. None has been so wrong and so absurd as that of the Pharisees (as they are presented in the gospel of Matthew)."⁴⁷ The religious leaders in the gospel are the quintessential people of exile. The offer of freedom comes and yet they refuse to accept it because it includes those whom they feel are unworthy. Matthew is showing us that the restored community is not made up of the religious leaders, who refuse to accept God's offer of forgiveness, but it is made up of those who are willing to risk believing that Jesus really is the messiah, and has come to end the exile, but in a manner that is totally unexpected.

2.4.2 Isaiah 42 and the Exile

Another strong link to exile in Matthew 12:31-32 rests in the fact that Jesus quotes a portion of Isaiah 42 in the pericope immediately before the Beelzebul controversy. Isaiah begins the chapter by speaking about what the servant of the Lord will do (heal, encourage, establish justice, etc.). This is followed by a scathing explanation of why Israel is in the state of exile. They are there because of the fact that their eyes are blind, their ears are deaf, they have been handed over to the plunderers by the Lord himself. Yet the beginning of the chapter gives hope to the blind, and promises to free the captives from prison. It is virtually impossible not to see that Matthew had intended to echo this passage. Matthew reminds us that there were essentially two kinds of people in the world, those who followed the healer and giver of life, and those who

⁴⁷ Hagner, Matthew, 1:344.

remained in their prison. The Jewish leadership had chosen to remain in their prison by rejecting the work of the Spirit and assigning it to Satan. This is a sin, which causes exile for life.

Another connection to the exile is the use of the concept of an unforgivable sin in Jewish literature. The fact that there was a sin that was not forgivable indicates that there were those who would remain unforgiven, and thus those who would remain in exile.⁴⁸

2.5 Matthew 26:28: The Passover Meal and Exile

(28) τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.

The Passover meal stirs in the hearts of the disciples the reminder of the promise of restoration.⁴⁹ Wright points out that the meal said two very specific things.⁵⁰ It first spoke of leaving Egypt. It secondly spoke of the Kingdom of God. Jesus seems to indicate through this passage that he is the one through whom the forgiveness is being offered, and through whom the Kingdom is being inaugurated. The inauguration of the Kingdom and forgiveness are present through Jesus' blood and covenant.

Wright points out that Jesus' mention of the blood of the covenant may echo Zechariah 9:11-12,

(11) As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I have set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. (12) Return to the stronghold, O prisoners who have the hope; This very day I am declaring that I will restore double to you.

⁴⁸ As to the actual nature of this sin, commentators are divided. Hagner, *Matthew*, 347, "that it is a assignment of the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan". Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II: 348, simply say, "We remain stumped."

⁴⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory*, 555.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 557.

If this is the case, then for Matthew the exile is ending and the restoration is beginning because of the fact that Israel was about to be “rescued from her exilic plight” which had come about as a direct result of her sin.⁵¹ This last meeting of the pre-resurrection Jesus with his disciples in Matthew may echo the very start of Matthew’s gospel when Jesus’ name is explained as that one who “σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν.”

Thus the forgiveness that Jesus was offering was the forgiveness offered not through the temple, but through Jesus himself. Jesus was offering himself and specifically his death as the climax to end the long history of exile and the start of the history of the Kingdom of God

With this in mind let us now see how Jesus’ offer of God’s forgiveness, which was in essence an offer of an end to the exile, affected his parable of the unforgiving servant? More specifically, “How do the exile and the parable fit together?” It is to this question that we now turn.

⁵¹ Ibid., 561.

CHAPTER THREE

A CLOSE EXAMINATION OF THE PARABLE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO EXILE

Introduction:

The purpose of this chapter will be to examine the parable carefully in the context of its relationship to exile. This examination cannot hope to be comprehensive for every single exegetical issue but the major issues will be dealt with carefully.

Method for the Interpretation of the Parable

Any attempt to set forth one method, which will accurately interpret all of Jesus' parables, is doomed to fail. Wright has argued that many of the parables should be seen as "Israel's story in miniature."⁵² In an attempt to test Wright's thesis on this particular parable, two important hermeneutical principles will guide the study of the parable.

First, for the purposes of this essay, we will look at the parable as a story that has been preserved by Matthew for the specific aim of furthering the theological ends of his work. Secondly, we will examine the parable through the "lens" of the theme of exile. This is to understand whether or not the parable is indeed "Israel's story in miniature."

Context of the Parable

The parable occurs in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, at the end of the fourth discourse.⁵³ Matthew may have, in this discourse, grouped the sayings of Jesus into two main

⁵² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 179.

⁵³ For an overview of major suggestions as to structure see Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1:59-61*; S. McKnight, "Matthew" in *DJG*, 529-532; J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 1-39; In contrast to the above suggestions see the lone voice of Robert Gundry (Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10 who argues, "it is doubtful that the first evangelist thought in terms of [an outline]."

headings with three sub-headings each.⁵⁴ The parable occurs at the very end of the fourth discourse, after the teaching on the 'excommunication' of a brother (18:15-20), and the question of Peter (18:21-2). The placement of the parable has been called by some, "a culminating point" of Matthew's Gospel.⁵⁵ At the very least, one realizes that its placement at the end of the discourse makes it (in all likelihood) a "hermeneutical key to the chapter as a whole."⁵⁶ Matthew places the parable here because he wants to teach an aspect of forgiveness that is not evident either in the excommunication rules, or in Jesus' answer to Peter's question.⁵⁷

In the next section, Peter's question is essentially, "How many times must I forgive someone before I can cut them off and no longer count them as a brother?"⁵⁸ The last section, the parable itself, has a number of exilic links, which will be explored below. The evidence will mount that Wright is correct in his assertion that forgiveness is to be united with the concept of exile. We would examine the parable through the grid of those issues that most clearly relate to exile, all the while dealing with the exegetical issues as they arise. A larger question is whether this forgiveness is personal or national (or both). That question will be dealt with below.

⁵⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:65.

⁵⁵ E. Fuchs, "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant," in *Studia Evangelica*, vol. I, ed. F.L. Cross (Berlin, 1959), 489; cf. J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 105.

⁵⁶ J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 73. For a brief examination of the theology of this chapter as it relates to the entire gospel see U. Luz, *The Theology of Matthew*, trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 105-108.

⁵⁷ For a comparison of Matthew 18:21-35 with Mark and Luke see Appendix II.

⁵⁸ Cf. Appendix II for 'Internal tensions in the parable'.

3. The Parable's Relationship to Exile

There are at least four major issues or motifs which link this parable to the exile: (1) the issue of the kingdom of Heaven; (2) the issue of forgiveness; (3) the motif of mercy; and (4) the motif of prison. Each of these will be examined carefully in an attempt to explain the parable in its first century context and understand these exilic links.

3.1. The Parable Linked to the Exile Through the Use of the Phrase, “ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν”⁵⁹

The parable begins with the statement that this story is meant to explain to the hearers what the kingdom of Heaven is like. This is a fitting place to start, because many of the major interpreters of the parables realize that Jesus' parables revolve around one theme: The kingdom of God/Heaven.⁶⁰

The first question that is raised is, of course, exactly what is the “kingdom of Heaven.” This identity will be examined in four areas: a brief overview of the term; a brief examination of the roots of the term kingdom in the Hebrew Bible; an examination of the term in the Gospel of Matthew; and last, an overview of the relationship between the kingdom and exile.

3.1.1 A Basic Overview of the Term

Jesus uses this phrase “ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν” thirty-three times in the gospel of Matthew. A significant number (at least nine) of those times the phrase is used to begin a

⁵⁹ Cf. Appendix II for the use of style and vocabulary for determining Matthean redaction and to know what were the actual redactional decisions.

⁶⁰ On the importance of parables in understanding Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of Heaven, see Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 198-369.

parable, which presumably helps to explain just what the kingdom is.⁶¹ The very phrase seems to be designed to help the hearer of the story understand what Jesus means by “the kingdom of Heaven.”⁶² Caird states the matter eloquently.

“But if a teacher spends an enormous amount of time telling people what the kingdom of God is like, we can reasonably assume that the idea being presented is different from the popular one.”⁶³

The question that Caird raises, of course, is “How much different is the kingdom as it was taught by Jesus?” The phrase, as it is used here clearly, has to do with the ethical behavior which separates a non-member from a member of the kingdom. This relationship between the kingdom and ethics is an often-neglected one. This story, however, links the two in very clear and unambiguous terms. The person who fails to forgive is not (and perhaps will never be) a member of that kingdom of God.

The parable begins its description of the kingdom with a term of comparison (ὁμοιότης). This comparison has been examined by Carson, who finds that the phrase simply means, “the kingdom should be compared to.”⁶⁴ In this case the comparison is to a king. On a wider level however, the comparison is also a contrast. The contrast is between the gracious ethical behavior of the king, and the poor ethical behavior of the servant.

Another question that arises is: “Is the ‘kingdom of God’ the same as the ‘kingdom of Heaven’?” We can say that the term “kingdom of Heaven” as it is used in Matthew is essentially a different way of saying the “kingdom of God.” Jeremias points out that even in,

⁶¹ The citations as well as a more nuanced look at Matthew’s use of this term will follow.

⁶² See D. A. Carson, “The ‘homoios’ Word-Group as Introduction to Some Matthean Parables,” in *NTS* 31 (1985), 277-82.

⁶³ G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, ed. L. D. Hurst (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 351.

⁶⁴ Carson, “Word-Group.”

“The pre-Christian period there was a prohibition against uttering the tetragrammaton, to ensure that the second commandment (Ex. 20:7; Deut 5:11) was followed as scrupulously as possible and to exclude any misuse of the divine name.”⁶⁵

This is not to argue that there are not different nuances of meaning inherent in the kingdom sayings. There clearly are. The point, however, is not one of nuance but of referent, which seems to be the same in both “The kingdom of Heaven” and the “kingdom of God.”⁶⁶

3.1.2 Hebrew Bible Background to the Term

Before examining the kingdom passages in the Gospel of Matthew, it is important to examine the background to this phrase. Where does Jesus/Matthew get this idea of the kingdom, which was apparently already some sort of symbol? The symbol is not made up by Jesus, but comes from the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁷ The concept of God’s rule as King occurs in some sense in every book, from Genesis to Malachi. Each of these books speak about the day when God will become King.⁶⁸ This final Kingship of God will be the consummation of all that God has promised through the Prophets.

The kingdom of God is pictured as a time when the actions, as well as the hearts of those who are its members will be purified so that they may walk in obedience. This will occur for

⁶⁵ Jeremias, New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus, 9. Note that Jeremias specifically mentions Matthew’s use of the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in this context.

⁶⁶ In Matthew 19:23-24 we find the two phrases used almost certainly interchangeably, arguing that Matthew, at least saw the two terms as virtually synonymous:

(23) Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πλούσιος δυσκόλως εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. (24) πάλιν δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, εὐκοπώτερον ἐστὶν κάμηλον διὰ τρυπήματος ῥαφίδος διελθεῖν ἢ πλούσιον εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ

On this question see the very excellent discussion by Davies and Allison, Matthew 1:389-392. They conclude (392) that the reader of Matthew ought to think of the “kingdom of heaven” as nothing more than a stylistic variation of ‘kingdom of God’.

⁶⁷ For an analysis of the kingdom as it is seen through the framework of the book of Psalms see B. Chilton, Pure Kingdom: Jesus’ Vision of God, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁶⁸ See for example Ex 15:18, “The Lord shall reign for ever and ever”; Mic 4:6, “And the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion From now on and forever”; Zech 14:9, “And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be *the only* one, and His name *the only* one.”

two reasons. First, God will regenerate the hearts of those who are his people.⁶⁹ Second, those who are truly members of the kingdom will be righteous. That is, the real people of God are the ones who do his will.⁷⁰

Given that the Hebrew Bible clearly expects a coming kingdom and expects this kingdom to be ethically based, how does the Gospel of Matthew present the kingdom? The kingdom passages found in Matthew will be examined now in an effort to answer the question.

3.1.3 An Examination of the Kingdom Passages in Matthew

Matthew uses the term βασιλεία 55 times in 53 verses.⁷¹ Of course not all of these occurrences are instances of the term “ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.”: there are thirty three instances of this term in Matthew’s Gospel.⁷²

The question now is, “what did Jesus mean by the use of the term in this parable?”⁷³ Not everyone would even agree that there is a point in this particular passage. C.H. Dodd postulates that the formula here (i.e., “the kingdom of Heaven is like . . .”) “has become conventional.”⁷⁴ Even Dodd however will grant that the link between this parable and the kingdom has to do with ethics and judgment. What then does the phrase, as it is used here, mean?

⁶⁹ The most obvious example is Jer 31:33, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it: and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” Note that God has earlier stated in v. 8, “I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me.” See as well Isa 1:25 and Eze 36:25-26.

⁷⁰ See Isa 4:3-4 “And it will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy--everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst.”

⁷¹ The passages are: 3:2; 4:8; 4:17; 4:23; 5:3; 5:10; 5:19; 5:20; 6:10; 6:33; 7:21; 8:11; 8:12; 9:35; 10:7; 11:11; 11:12; 12:25; 12:26; 12:28; 13:11; 13:19; 13:24; 13:31; 13:33; 13:38; 13:41; 13:43; 13:44; 13:45; 13:47; 13:52; 16:19; 16:28; 18:1; 18:3; 18:4; 18:23; 19:12; 19:14; 19:23; 19:24; 20:1; 20:21; 21:31; 21:43; 22:2; 23:13; 24:7; 24:14; 25:1; 25:34; 26:29.

⁷² 3:2; 4:17; 5:3; 5:10; 5:19 (twice); 5:20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11; 11:12; 12:28; 13:11; 13:24; 13:31; 13:33; 13:44; 13:45; 13:47; 13:52; 16:19; 18:1; 18:3; 18:4; 18:23; 19:12; 19:14; 19:23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1.

⁷³ Jeremias, New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus, 31, points out that the expression kingdom of heaven/God occurs on the lips of Jesus as follows: Mark (13 times); Logia common to Matthew and Luke (9 times); Matthew only (27 times); Luke only (12 times); John (2 times). See also J. D. Kingsbury, Matthew, Structure, Christology, Kingdom, 128-160.

⁷⁴ C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom, (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1938), 33.

First, we must affirm that the “kingdom of Heaven” is an ethical kingdom. That is, it brings with it certain ethical demands of discipleship. The most obvious demand is to forgive. Secondly, we believe that the phrase “kingdom of Heaven” refers to both the future and the present. That the kingdom is present seems to be indicated by Matthew 12:28. Jesus is casting out demons and thus, he says, the kingdom of God has come. There are also a number of things that Jesus says that seem to place his expectation of the kingdom in the future (e.g. 6:10; 8:11).

To the parable we now turn in earnest. What does the parable teach about the kingdom and how does it relate to the exile? The idea of a king as the main character in a parable is common in the parables of the Talmud and Midrashim.⁷⁵ What then is the relationship between the story of this king, the kingdom which Jesus speaks of, and the exile?

3.1.4 The Kingdom of Heaven and Exile

The larger question is how this connection between ethics and the kingdom fits with the theme of exile. Meyer understands this as an often overlooked, yet fundamental facet of the kingdom, “namely the tie between the reign of God and the restoration of Israel.”⁷⁶

Another reason that this theme fits comes from the fact that exile results from unethical behavior. To the extent that exile is a punishment for sin, then the eschatological hope of the end of the exile must be accompanied by forgiveness, which is followed by non-sinful (i.e., ethical) behavior. This may have been the reason that the scribes and Pharisees are so angry with Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. They see him as disobeying clear ethical commands (e.g. table fellowship), and thus delaying the eschatological coming of God. Yet Jesus sees them as disobeying the most basic command of God, that of the forgiveness of others. Thus the very fact

⁷⁵ See W. C. Allen, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1977), 23.

⁷⁶ B. F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1979), 132-3.

that this kingdom of heaven deals with forgiveness indicates that this parable is a national lesson on what the enemies of Jesus are really missing in their search for the final eschatological coming of God and restoration of Israel. The kingdom will not come for you, Jesus says, until you learn that forgiveness is to be extended not just to those whom you think deserve it, but also to all of those who accept God's offer. The question that inevitably arises is, of course, if the exile had ended with Jesus' offer of forgiveness (or more specifically, with the fulfillment of that offer through his death and resurrection⁷⁷) why didn't more Jews recognize it?

Kingdom is the beginning of the reign of God, and thus, by definition, the end of the exile. When Jesus tells this parable he is saying to those who listen that the "kingdom of God, the return from exile, the great climax of Israel's history, is here, . . . though it does not look like you thought it would."⁷⁸ Thus it is clear that for many, if not most first-century Jews, the coming kingdom was a shorthand phrase for the time when God would become King, and all would begin to be put right in the world.

3.2 The Parable Linked to the Exile Through the Concept of Forgiveness

The parable cannot be properly understood without a clear view of what forgiveness meant to a Second-Temple Jew. It is to this issue that we now turn our attention. Before looking at the theological lessons that the parable teaches about forgiveness, one must understand the nature of the metaphor being used.

⁷⁷ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, (Downers Grove, IL:IVP, 1999), 126-148, has set out several of the arguments clearly, though on a semi-popular level.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

3.2.1 Debt As a Metaphor for Forgiveness

Forgiveness in this parable is seen as a release from a huge financial debt. The truth is that ten thousand talents was more money than any one person could ever have owed.⁷⁹ Some have argued that this amount is a Matthean redaction, which was not part of the original parable. Jeremias says that we simply fail to take seriously the fact that the parables often contain “an element of unexpectedness.”⁸⁰

Another argument stems from the fact that the word ‘δάνειον’ sometimes means loan rather than debt. In fact, Gundry argues that while the word can mean loan, the answer is to recognize “the use of hyperbole for a debt owed by a common slave to his royal master.”⁸¹ Thus the question of whether this word is to be taken literally or as hyperbole is crucial. While this noun could indeed mean ‘loan’, the phrase does not indicate that the loan was postponed, but wiped away or forgiven.⁸² Thus, the word that should really be investigated is not δάνειον but ἀφῆκεν. This is the explanation for what has happened, and this is the word that is much more frequently used by Matthew. The word usually means to forgive, or to wipe away. Thus the question of whether this was originally a loan or some other kind of debt is really secondary. The more important question is what happened to the amount. The answer of course is that it was wiped away, not just postponed.

This problem of debt has been used by Matthew earlier in the gospel as a metaphor for sin and guilt (Matt 6:12). While debt “is not a usual image for sin or guilt in Hebrew or Greek,

⁷⁹ M. C. de Boer, “Ten Thousand Talents: Matthew’s Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35),” in *CBQ* 50 (1988): 218, D. A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) understands that the amount could be “over a billion dollars.

⁸⁰ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, second ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 161.

⁸¹ Gundry, *Matthew*, 373.

⁸² See *BAGD*, 170.

the Aramaic noun for 'debt' . . . is often used metaphorically in this sense."⁸³ Jesus is saying in this gospel that just as debt is destroying and enslaving the nation, so sin is just as inescapable, and just as destructive. Thus the freedom from debt that many in Israel desired, yet were unable to achieve, was symbolic of the freedom from sin that many needed just as badly.

3.2.2 The Nature of the Link Between Forgiveness and Exile

In this section we will argue that in the area of forgiveness the parable teaches several important lessons. These lessons will be examined along these lines: we will revisit the argument that forgiveness was what was needed to end the exile; we will then examine the nature of the offer of forgiveness extended by God through Jesus; we will then see if this forgiveness is to be seen as Personal or Corporate. Finally, we will see what the requirements are of Jesus' offer of forgiveness.

3.2.2.1 The Relationship Between Sin, Exile, and Forgiveness

First, the question of the relationship between forgiveness and the exile must be briefly re-opened. It would be foolish to believe that simply because forgiveness may be connected with the exile in one area that it is connected in every instance in which Matthew mentions forgiveness. The question then becomes "What evidence can be found that this parable's view of forgiveness is linked, in the mind of Matthew, to the exile?"

The first piece of evidence of course has already been laid out. The kingdom of Heaven is another way of speaking of the restoration of Israel. Given that the kingdom is so clearly linked to forgiveness in this parable, the connection between forgiveness, the kingdom, and a

⁸³ J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:265.

restoration (and thus end of the exile) is not hard to see. These form a chain that drags one along to the inevitable conclusion that sin and exile are ultimately linked to the Kingdom.

A second argument stems from the fact that forgiveness was what was needed to end the exile, because the exile was caused by sin.

Given the problem with debt mentioned above, the good news should be seen as what happens when God intervenes. “The parable of the two debtors (Luke 7:41-43), the unmerciful servant (Matt 18:23-35) and the love of the father (Luke 15:11-32), show that in the good news what happens is the remission of debts.”⁸⁴ That is, when God acts, it is both to forgive Israel’s sins and to restore her fortunes. Thus it is only natural that the metaphor of remission of debt should be used for forgiveness of sin. To fail to forgive was as foolish an act as to fail to accept the remission of debt. Thus Jesus’

“demand of mutual forgiveness among his followers is not to be seen merely as a part of an abstract ethical agenda. It is part of what we might call the eschatological Torah. . . . Not to forgive one another would be a way of denying that this great, long-awaited event was taking place; in other words, it would be to cut off the branch on which they were sitting.”⁸⁵

3.2.2.2 The Nature of Jesus’ Offer of Forgiveness

The first question that must be asked is what Jesus may have meant by his offer of forgiveness. As we have suggested above, Matthew sees Jesus’ mission, in part at least, as offering an end to the exile. What evidence is there that Matthew saw Jesus’ offer of forgiveness as an integral part of that specific area of Jesus’ mission? This question has, in all fairness, already been answered. To the extent that Jesus’ mission can be summed up in his offer of forgiveness, it is clear that Matthew perceived this offer as in some sense, ending the exile.

⁸⁴ Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, 113-14.

⁸⁵ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, 70.

The question that immediately arises of course, is the same as the one that arose above: "If (after the mission of Jesus) the exile is over, why does Israel still look the same?" In other words, what exactly did this forgiveness of sins, and victory over evil "consist in if they (the redeemed New Israel) continued to live as they did, under Roman domination and persecution?"⁸⁶ Why do the forgiven, non-exiled followers of Jesus still look "for all the world as if they are still in exile?"⁸⁷ The answer is that the world has changed, though in a very subtle manner. There are at least two signs that show that the exile is over, and that the followers of Jesus have ultimately been forgiven.

First, the temple action of Jesus shows that the nature of the nation of Israel has changed. Jesus' temple action is seen as a symbolic action which is a prediction of God's judgment in the form of the destruction of the temple. Sanders argue that the overturning of the tables is an action that intends to predict the overturning of the temple itself.⁸⁸ He adds to this, evidence that Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24) and that one of the charges raised against him at his trial was that he threatened the temple (Matt 26:60), a charge which is repeated by the crowds at his crucifixion (Matt 27:40).

Why would Jesus have threatened the temple in this way? Because his offer of forgiveness was meant to bring on a new day. In fact, "the Temple . . . is quietly and decisively replaced - by Jesus himself."⁸⁹ Thus the destruction of the temple is evidence that a new day has come, the exile is over, and forgiveness is available through the offer of God, not in the Temple, but in Jesus.

⁸⁶ Wright, The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is, 126-148.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 126-148.

⁸⁸ Sanders, Jesus and Judaism, 70.

⁸⁹ Wright, The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is, 167.

Second, the resurrection shows that the nature of Israel has changed. The fact that Israel's messiah had been raised from the dead was a symbolic communication of the fact that Israel had been raised. Her time of death/exile were now over, and new life had begun. In fact,

“from the time of Ezekiel 37 onward “resurrection” was an image used to denote the great return from exile, the renewal of the covenant, and to connote the belief that when this happened it would mean that Israel's sin and death (i.e., the exile) had been dealt with, that YHWH had renewed his covenant with his people.”⁹⁰

It seems that Wright has put his finger here on a very important, yet underlying theme of Second-Temple Judaism. Ezekiel sees the restoration of the land and people in terms of a resurrection.⁹¹ This vision is primarily concerned with the restoration and revival of the nation.⁹² The interesting thing is that Matthew seems to pick up this image in his passion narrative. When one reads Ezek 37:13 alongside Matt 27:52-3, it is virtually impossible not to see that Matthew is echoing the Ezekiel passage.⁹³ Thus Ezekiel sees and knows the horror of the exile, it is death, a death that has no hope of being reversed apart from the incredible work of God. Thus, proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus has brought about what the prophet Ezekiel had seen, hope in the midst of exile, a release from death and sin. “The exile is over - not just Israel's exile, in actual and spiritual Babylon but the exile of the human race, shut out of the garden.”⁹⁴

3.2.2.3 Is This Forgiveness To Be Seen As Personal or Corporate?

A second question that this offer of forgiveness raises has to do with the nature of the forgiveness. Is this offer to be seen in individualistic or corporate terms? Is God's offer of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁹¹ As to whether this is intended to teach an individual resurrection, see D. I. Block, The Book of Ezekiel (Chapters 25-48) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 383-387.

⁹² Ibid., 383.

⁹³ See Davies and Allison, Matthew, 3:634; France, Matthew, 401. Gundry, Matthew, 576 .

⁹⁴ Wright, Challenge, 164.

forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible (the clear background to Jesus' offer) seen in both personal as well as corporate terms? The Hebrew Bible contains many prayers for forgiveness of both sorts.⁹⁵ One may see examples of prayers for personal forgiveness in 2 Kgs 5:18, where Naaman prays for personal pardon from the Lord, as well as in Ps 25:11, where the psalmist asks for forgiveness of his own iniquity.⁹⁶ On the other hand there are many passages which ask for forgiveness on a corporate level. In 1 Kgs 8:30, Solomon is praying at the dedication of the temple. He asks the Lord to hear the supplication of his people and forgive them of their sins (in 2 Chronicles 6 this prayer is repeated). In Ps 79:9 the writer cries out for restoration and forgiveness of his people, not just of himself. Wright points out many more passages that deal with forgiveness on a national level (Lam. 4:22; Jer. 31:31; 33:4-11; Ezek. 36:24-26; 37:21-23; Isa. 40:1-2; 43:25-44:3; Dan. 9:16-51).⁹⁷ What evidence exists in the parable itself to point toward either an individual or corporate sense of forgiveness (or perhaps both)? Is this a national story or is this a story about the individual life before God? There are a number of reasons for seeing the nature of forgiveness in the parable, though couched in individualistic terms, as nationalistic in scope, while still having individual application. That is, the arguments which follow show that the parable should be seen as a warning about what would happen to that group of people who failed to respond correctly to Jesus' offer of forgiveness.

First, the parable should be seen as nationalistic because it has links to the end of the exile. The nature of forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew speaks, in some sense at least, about restoration from exile. The very fact that forgiveness is linked to the exile indicates that there is a national audience for the parable, not just an individual one. Thus the restoration offered, and

⁹⁵ The following passages were suggested by Paul Ellingworth, "Forgiveness of Sins," in *DJG*, 241.

⁹⁶ One should not forget that the Psalms which began as cries for personal forgiveness often came to be used in corporate worship. See Ellingworth, "Forgiveness of Sins," in *DJG*, 241.

⁹⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 268-74.

the exile threatened are not primarily spoken to the individual, but to the nation, or at least groups within the nation.

Secondly, while there are offers of forgiveness, which are personal in Matthew's gospel, many of the offers of forgiveness seen there are corporate. The gospel begins with the promise in 1:21 that Jesus will save his people from their sins. This is clearly a corporate view of forgiveness. Jesus will save a group of people identified as his own.

Wright is correct when he states,

“for an average second temple Jew what mattered more than his or her own isolated, individual “salvation” was the whole future direction of the purposes of YHWH for Israel and the world.”⁹⁸

Another piece of evidence that the parable should be seen in corporate terms, comes from the nature of the story itself. The servant in the parable is punished for not allowing the forgiveness which he had received affect the world in which he lived. His crime was taking the forgiveness as a personal gift, which did not need to be shared with those around him. So, the forgiveness that we see in this parable must be seen in terms larger than just a personal offer. To see God's offer of forgiveness in purely personal terms is to make the same mistake (on a smaller level) that the wicked servant made.

3.2.2.4 What Requirements Did Jesus' Offer Bring With It?

A third question that must be asked and answered concerning the offer of forgiveness extended by Jesus is this: “What requirements did this offer bring with it?”

When Jesus calls for repentance he is calling for those who are listening to accept God's offer of forgiveness through him. This repentance however, was not as willingly given as might

⁹⁸ N. T. Wright, “Theology, History and Jesus: A Response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh.” in *JSNT* 69 (1988), 257.

first be imagined. Many in Jesus day felt that repentance was good and right for those who were true sinners (publicans and such) but was not really needed for them (i.e., those who were not “terrible sinners”). It is for this reason that Jesus reverses the normal expectation of repentance as being difficult for those generally viewed as sinners, and shows that repentance is really more difficult “for the pious, the upright, the holy.”⁹⁹ Yet for those who refuse to repent, Jesus promises a horrible judgment, because they have refused to accept God’s offer of forgiveness. Thus repentance was not just an arbitrary requirement, but to a “new recognition of one’s sin and sinfulness . . . and a new recognition of one’s neighbor.”¹⁰⁰

So a repentant person shows his\her repentance by extending forgiveness to others around him/her. Jeremias states this in very strong terms: “more than anything else, however, membership of the *basileia* in ordinary everyday life is expressed by an indefatigable capacity to forgive the brethren.”¹⁰¹ This is the very point of the parable: the person who is unwilling to forgive others shows by his/her actions that he/she has not really experienced kingdom life. He/she has not “sensed what God has done in acting at the end of history to redeem Israel.”¹⁰²

It is this very problem that leads to the conflict in Matthew’s gospel between the Jewish leadership and Jesus. Jesus states that instead of extending God’s offer of forgiveness, they “shut up the kingdom of heaven.” (23:13). In fact it is to this group that Jesus gives the serious warning that the kingdom will be taken away from them (21:43).

Thus the central message of the parable is clear: everyone who claims to be a member of the kingdom must have gained this membership through repentance. A person shows that

⁹⁹ Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 132.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰¹ Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, 221.

¹⁰² Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 226.

repentance by being willing to forgive others. Next we will look at the issue of the relationship between exile and the offer of mercy (σπλαγχνιζόμαι) in the parable.

3.3 The Parable is Linked to the Exile Through the Motif of Mercy

In the parable, the reason for the seeming relinquishment of the debt is because of the feeling of “mercy” on the part of the King. A great deal of the significance of the word in the Hebrew Bible comes from the fact that the “compassion” of God is seen as the basis for the eschatological renewal of the covenant and restoration of the people (cf. Deut. 13:8; Isa. 14:1; 49:10, 13; 54:8, 10; 60:10; Jer 12:15; 33:26; Ezek. 39:25; Micah 7:19; Hab. 3:2; Zech. 10:6).

Much of the significance of the use of σπλαγχνιζόμαι in the New Testament comes from its being used to describe Jesus as well as his use of the word to speak of forgiveness in other parables. Jesus is described as a person who has compassion on others, just as God has compassion on his people (see for example Matt. 9:36 as well as 14:14). Several of Jesus’ parables focus on this concept of the granting of compassion to those who apparently do not deserve it.¹⁰³

The word is used five times in Matthew and is used to refer to Jesus in all cases except the current one. The use of the word here in 18:27, contrasts with ὀργισθεὶς in v. 34, as well as ἠλέησα in v. 33.¹⁰⁴ The King is at first compassionate, yet later angry enough to send the servant into prison.

When this use of the word here in Matthew is compared and contrasted with the concept in the Hebrew Bible, and the use of the word in the other gospels, it becomes clear that this term has exilic links both in the ministry of Jesus and in Jesus’ actual use of the term. One cannot

¹⁰³ Specifically the parables of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37) and the “Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32).

¹⁰⁴ Hagner, Matthew, II:424.

help but see the clear connection between the Father's extension of compassion in his renewal of Covenant Israel, and the King's extension of compassion in his dealing with the servant's debt. If the showing of compassion on the part of the king is a symbol of the reconstitution of Israel, one would expect to see the other side of the coin, the punishment of those who did not accept this compassion. This is seen in the final act of the story as the servant is turned over to the "torturers." It is to this punishment that we now turn.

3.4 The Parable is Linked to the Exile Through the Motif of Prison

In the end, the servant must face the wrath of the king whose forgiveness he has treated scornfully by not extending it to others. He meets this king who again has decided to "settle accounts."¹⁰⁵ The king is angry as a result of his treatment of a fellow servant and has him placed into prison until his debt is paid. This section of the parable raises a number of questions: "What are the links between prison and exile?" "How prevalent was the sale of a person for a personal debt?" "What does Jesus mean by 'torturers'?" "What would constitute the paying back of the debt?" It is to these questions that we now turn.

3.4.1 Prison and Exile

The link between prison, as it is spoken of here, and exile is very strong. The link begins with the understanding that being in exile was much like being in prison. A glance at the words used in the LXX to refer to the exile makes this point clear.¹⁰⁶ This becomes more significant

¹⁰⁵ This "settling accounts" (συνἄραι λόγον), has eschatological overtones (see Hagner, Matthew, II:538). The phrase is found again in the parable of the talents (25:19). While these two parables are the only instances of the use of the word συναίρω in the New Testament, the idea of this eschatological settling of accounts occurs in Mat 5:25-6 and 7:1-2.

¹⁰⁶ See S. J. Hafemann, "Paul and the Exile of Israel in Galatians 3-4," in Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions, ed. J. M. Scott (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 376, n. 73.

when one realizes that φυλάκη is “Matthew’s word-of-choice in material that is either special M tradition, or Matthean redaction: 18:30; 25:36, 39, 43, 44.”¹⁰⁷

3.4.2 Sale for Personal Debt

While there is no question that there were serious problems with debt in Second-Temple Judaism, it is somewhat difficult to discern exactly how that debt was treated. Some have argued that what Jesus was actually proclaiming was,

“a long awaited “jubilee,” in which debts would be canceled, prisoners released, and people returned to their family inheritance, as provided for in Leviticus 25 - in other words, the offer of a new life made possible by the chance to start over economically.”¹⁰⁸

Whatever the case may be, we can say almost with certainty, that this parable deals with debt as a metaphor, not with the release of debt in actual life; to that extent whether or not a person was often sold into slavery is really a secondary question.¹⁰⁹ Thus, simply because Jewish law is not applicable to the character’s performance does not mean that it is “unrelated to the reader’s expectations.”¹¹⁰ The very fact that the parable is still effective today is evidence that it does not need to have a one to one correspondence to the world in which the hearers live.

3.4.3 What Does Jesus Mean by “Torturers”?

The word used (βασανισταῖς) is found only here in the New Testament.¹¹¹ It is true that “the punishment of torture was not allowed in Israel . . . unless the parable is referring to Herod

¹⁰⁷ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II:198, n. 89.

¹⁰⁸ R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence. Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 251.

¹⁰⁹ On the nature of slavery during this period see J. A. Glancey, “Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables,” in *JBL* 119 (2000) 67-90.

¹¹⁰ Bernard Brandon Scott, “The King’s Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34,” in *JBL* 104 (1985) 432, note 18.

¹¹¹ A cognate verb does occur in 8:29 “καὶ ἰδοὺ ἔκραξαν λέγοντες. Τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοί, υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ; ἦλθες ὧδε πρὸ καιροῦ βασανίσαι ἡμᾶς” The noun κόλασιν (severe punishment) occurs in 25:46.

the Great, who made abundant use of torture, heedless of Jewish law.”¹¹² It may also be that Jesus story is reminding the hearers of the Roman system of debt collection where torture would be frequent.¹¹³ In fact

“an inscription from Puteoli details the job description of a *manceps*, a public official whose duties included torturing and even executing slaves on demand. Private citizens could hire the *manceps* to conduct the desired torture of their slaves.”¹¹⁴

This part of the story echoes verse 30 where the servant who owed a relatively small debt was put into prison. The main point that this section is meant to reinforce is simply this: one who is not forgiving will not be forgiven. Thus, one who refuses to allow restoration to be extended even to the “unworthy” is himself unworthy of the benefits of restoration. The torture is really for those who are unwilling to forgive. Who then, in Matthew’s Gospel, is seen as being unwilling to extend forgiveness? It is the Jewish leadership. This is also evidence that this parable was intended to speak to the Jewish leaders, and not primarily the disciples.

3.4.4 What Would Constitute the Paying Back of the Debt?

Of course, one of the most significant questions that comes to mind when one reads this part of the story is this: “How could the servant pay back a debt when he was imprisoned?” The answer is that “the defaulter is being punished in order to motivate him and those who care for him to raise the necessary funding.”¹¹⁵

In this case, of course, the debt is so high that the idea of paying it back is almost unthinkable. There are many who argue that this punishment is perpetual, since a debt this size

¹¹² Jeremias, *Parables*, 212.

¹¹³ Hagner, *Matthew*, II:540.

¹¹⁴ Glancy, “Slaves and Slavery,” 67.

¹¹⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II:802-3.

could never be repaid.¹¹⁶ Perhaps the best solution, given the context that the parable is meant as a warning to those who would reject the offer of forgiveness, is that it is a grand illustration of what happens to those who reject this offer.

Conclusion

This parable simply divides people into two camps. There are those who are willing to accept the offer of God, through Jesus, and those who are not. Those who are not (very clearly the Jewish leadership in Matthew's gospel) simply will never totally get out of exile, no matter how long they stay in the land. It is interesting that the language used in the parable to refer to the servant (Δούλε πονηρε,) is used elsewhere "in connection with Satan . . . or when speaking of the scribes and Pharisees (9:27; 20:30).¹¹⁷

Secondly, this reading of the parable supports the overall thesis because we have seen evidence that the parable was delivered to a group of people who refused to accept the offer of forgiveness through Jesus. We have also seen evidence that this parable, because of its many themes (among those are kingdom, forgiveness, mercy, debt, and prison) has strong links to the concept of exile. In the next section, we will examine other passages dealing with forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew with a view to finding these same themes.

¹¹⁶ See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, II:803; Gundry, *Matthew*, 374.

¹¹⁷ Leopold Sabourin, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1982), 726.

CHAPTER FOUR

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF FORGIVENESS “Forgiveness and Life in Community”

Questions of how and when forgiveness should be offered, both on a corporate and an individual level, are significant ones for the first as well as the twenty-first century Christian. This last chapter will deal with how the proposed link between forgiveness and exile actually should be lived out in our own lives. How does the link between exile and forgiveness that has been postulated above affect the modern Christian and his or her view of forgiveness? In other words, we might ask ourselves how restoration in a particular situation in the first-century church actually worked. Matthew has given us the theoretical analysis of such exile/restoration of persons or groups of people who were unrepentant. We will now see how forgiveness in the Christian community between members of the community ought to work itself out as a living example of what God has done for his people Israel (thus individual forgiveness, yet extended at a corporate level). One of the best ways that we might answer the above question is by looking at it practically.

➤ **Domestic Violence:**

The problem of forgiveness quickly surfaces when we encounter victims of domestic violence in the church. This type of violence is a very common feature here in Nairobi: it's enough to take up the daily newspapers, and the pages are all full of stories of domestic violence. Forgiveness is found to be a “problem” in relation to domestic violence because it has proven counter productive. Of the many passages that describe or mandate forgiveness, Matt 18:21-35, is perhaps the one most relevant to forgiving domestic violence. In the context of Matthew's

community, it is likely that the author and readers would assume that forgiveness is a communal practice. Even from a modern individualistic framework, we should still be able to recognize Matthew's communal emphasis¹¹⁸ and the same way to forgive domestic violence should be a community venture rather than just an individual's initiative.

➤ **Case Study:**

I. Marcia, 36 years old, was beaten on her arms and back and kicked in the stomach by her husband. This was the worst of the violent episodes that had been building up over a year. Not knowing what to do, she went to her pastor for advice about how to save her marriage. Her pastor told Marcia that a good marriage requires forgiveness. She returned home and forgave her husband. The violence in their marriage continued to escalate, and when she did leave her marriage two years later, she left her church as well.

II. Peter decided to look for help after a neighbour called the police and Peter was nearly arrested for attacking his girlfriend. He went to his minister and disclosed how he had "pushed her around" the night before. The minister reminded Peter that God forgives all human sin. After praying together, Peter felt better and went home. A week later he was arrested after his girlfriend went to the emergency room with a broken arm.¹¹⁹

In the first story, the minister's response reveals a clear understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. By telling the woman that forgiveness will help the marriage, the pastor implies that she is somehow at fault; if she changes her behavior (to become more forgiving), the violence should stop.

¹¹⁸ D.J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 1.

¹¹⁹ The stories of Marcia and Peter are composite stories taken from the examples of many women and men whose lives have been affected by violent relationships.

Nor does Peter's forgiveness by his minister have any transforming effect on his violence. In using the words "forgiveness" and "sin", the minister implies that Peter has done something wrong, but stops short of holding Peter accountable for his actions or requiring change; in fact, there is not a hint that Peter should attempt to change. or that change is possible.

A fresh reading of Matthew 18 may call us back to our responsibility as a community to recognize sin, to speak the truth about that sin, and (again as a community) to forgive. Forgiveness in the parable is corporate forgiveness which will set us all free from our exilic fallen nature.

But then very often our response to victims of domestic violence has been like our reading of Matt 18:21-35. We are horrified by the situation and counsel them to forgive, just as we would counsel the unforgiving servant, but we do not notice ourselves in the story. One of the primary tasks of the Christian community in confronting domestic violence is to understand our need to repent of violence. Becoming aware of domestic violence requires that we recognize the many ways the church has encouraged this violence and the ways we personally have accepted or minimized the many forms of violence against women in our culture.

Becoming able to forgive domestic violence would entail addressing our own individual participation in violence and our culture's systematic participation. Forgiveness would challenge us to identify the various means of violence against women from those which seem insignificant to those which are brutal and obvious – and the ways in which our sexism and racism interact to make justice difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. It would require that we prepare ourselves to carry out the confrontation described in Matthew 18.

Undoubtedly, church life would look very different if we took seriously this responsibility of forgiveness coupled with calling the sinner to account, and it would also send a

strong message to the abuser that the other members of the community consider their behavior unacceptable. Calling a member back into fellowship by telling the truth about sin is a task for all who consider themselves part of that faith community.

Through the practice of forgiveness, the church participates in the reign of God, for we recognize both the grace that is given to us and our calling as agents of God's grace to others.

Domestic violence will only begin to decrease when our society recognizes it as a problem and communicates that it is wrong. An understanding of corporate forgiveness coincides with the goal of preventing violence because both involve not only the repentance of the sinner, but also the accountability of the community and the need to face our own sin. When the church can recognize its own complicity in the sin of domestic violence and when members hold one another accountable for the changes that will be necessary to live as Jesus' disciples, then the kingdom of God is present and the church can offer forgiveness to others with greater depth of understanding and become a witness to those outside its bounds who struggle against violence. Matthew 18 reminds us of our call to recognize sin, to tell the truth about that sin, and yet not to return to evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good.

By taking an indifferent attitude to atrocities happening to humankind (domestic violence is just an example of the evil/sinful tendencies of humankind) we are all placed into exile by God for a reason. This reason is so that we may come to grips with what we have done and are continually doing, and to know the seriousness of our sins. Once this sin is recognized, repented of, and Jesus' offer of forgiveness accepted, the exile comes to an end. A new day begins in our lives, a day which was brought about only by the forgiveness found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

It is clear to anyone who reads the gospel that Matthew was steeped in the Old Testament tradition. He makes allusions, sometimes obvious, but often subtle, to a particular passage and then expects that his readers will “fill in the details” of the context from which the allusion comes. In this case the context is that of hope. “Every strand of hope and trial in the Hebrew bible is woven together in the eschatological appearance of the Promised One.”¹²⁰ The exile is over and the return has begun. Matthew clearly sees Jesus and his offer of forgiveness as responsible for bringing about that return.

The weight of the evidence here supports the conclusion that Matthew saw the mission of Jesus, at least in part, to be the fulfilling of Israel’s hopes through ending the exile. While this end to the exile was in appearance not what Israel had expected, Matthew believed that this was the mission of God. The actions, words of and words about Jesus show that he had come to save his people from sin, and from the consequences of sin, the exile.

It has been the purpose of this essay to show that the parable of the ‘Unforgiving Servant’ spoken of in Matthew 18 must be viewed in the larger context of the broad motif of exile. When viewed with this motif in mind, the point that Jesus is making with the parable becomes clear. Many of those who have been most blessed (e. g. by the receipt of the law, etc.) have refused to allow for forgiveness to those who are least blessed (tax-collectors, lepers, women, etc.). In the same way that the man who had been forgiven of 10,000 talents should have felt himself most blessed, and offered this forgiveness to those who were less fortunate, he showed his lack of real forgiveness by his failure to forgive others. By failing to forgive others, he chose to live in exile while the tax-collectors and sinners moved on to restoration.

¹²⁰ Hagner, Matthew, I:38.

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APPENDIX I
RSV Translation of the Greek Text

GNT Matthew 1:21 τέξεται δὲ υἱὸν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν· αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν.

RSV Matthew 1:21 she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

GNT Matthew 18:23 Διὰ τοῦτο ὡμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὃς ἠθέλησεν συνᾶραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ. 24 ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν προσηνέχθη αὐτῷ εἷς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων ταλάντων. 25 μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀποδοῦναι ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ὁ κύριοςπραθῆναι καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἔχει, καὶ ἀποδοθῆναι. 26 πεσὼν οὖν ὁ δούλος προσεκύνη αὐτῷ λέγων, Μακροθύμησον ἐπ' ἐμοί, καὶ πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι. 27 σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἀπέλυσεν αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ δάνειον ἀφήκεν αὐτῷ. 28 ἐξελθὼν δὲ ὁ δούλος ἐκεῖνος εὗρεν ἕνα τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ, ὃς ὤφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια, καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν ἐπιγενεὶ λέγων, Ἄποδος εἰ τι ὀφείλεις. 29 πεσὼν οὖν ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτὸν λέγων, Μακροθύμησον ἐπ' ἐμοί, καὶ ἀποδώσω σοι. 30 ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἠθέλην ἀλλὰ ἀπελθὼν ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς φυλακὴν ἕως ἀποδῶ τὸ ὀφειλόμενον. 31 ἰδόντες οὖν οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα καὶ ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἑαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα. 32 τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ, Δοῦλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾳ σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με· 33 οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς κἀγὼ σὲ ἠλέησα; 34 καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς ἕως οὗ ἀποδῶ πᾶν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον. 35 Οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν.

RSV Matthew 18:23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; 25 and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; 33 and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

GNT Matthew 9:2 καὶ ἰδοὺ προσέφερον αὐτῷ παραλυτικὸν ἐπὶ κλίνης βεβλημένον. καὶ ἰδὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὴν πίστιν αὐτῶν εἶπεν τῷ παραλυτικῷ, Θάρσει, τέκνον, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι. 3 καὶ ἰδοὺ τινες τῶν γραμματέων εἶπαν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, Οὗτος βλασφημεῖ. 4 καὶ ἰδὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὰς ἐνθυμήσεις αὐτῶν εἶπεν, Ἵνατί ἐνθυμεῖσθε πονηρὰ ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν; 5 τί γάρ ἐστιν εὐκοπώτερον, εἰπεῖν, Ἐφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι, ἢ εἰπεῖν, Ἐγείρε καὶ περιπάτει; 6 Ἵνα δὲ εἰδῆτε ὅτι ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀφίεναι ἁμαρτίας τότε λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ, Ἐγερθεὶς ἄρῃ σου τὴν κλίνην καὶ ὑπάγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου.

RSV Matthew 9:2 And behold, they brought to him a paralytic, lying on his bed; and when Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." 3 And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." 4 But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? 6 But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- he then said to the paralytic -- "Rise, take up your bed and go home."

GNT Matthew 12:31 Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πᾶσα ἁμαρτία καὶ βλασφημία ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἡ δὲ τοῦ πνεύματος βλασφημία οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται. 32 καὶ ὃς ἐὰν εἴπῃ λόγον κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· ὃς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου, οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ οὔτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

RSV Matthew 12:31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

GNT Matthew 26:28 τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν.

RSV Matthew 26:28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

APPENDIX II

➤ A Comparison Of Matthew 18:21-35 With Mark And Luke

This first criterion is the easiest and most straightforward. A simple glance at Matthew 18:21-35 (Pericope number 173 in the Aland Synopsis) shows that the material is unparalleled. Gundry, however, argues that this parable has been composed by Matthew by “adapting the parable of the two debtors told to Simon the Pharisee (or leper; Luke 7:41-43).”¹ A simple glance at the two works should be enough to convince the scholar that while there are certain similarities (e.g. there are two debtors, there is forgiveness of the debts) the dissimilarities are far more numerous. The amount owed by the debtors in Luke does not begin to approach that owed in Matthew 18; the creditor in Luke forgives both of the debtors; more importantly the Lukan parable seems to be about thankfulness rather than forgiveness.

The verbal similarities which are put forth by Gundry are not persuasive for two reasons. First, one might expect, in two different stories about money and debt, to encounter the terms ‘debtor’, ‘moneylender’, ‘owe’ and ‘pay back’, without any necessity that the two stories were dependent on one another. Second, the parallels that Gundry makes are often quite a stretch. He offers the term *χρεοφειλέται* as a parallel. Matthew, however does not use this term (it is used only twice, both times by Luke). Matthew does use the term *ὀφειλέτης* but while these words are related, they are not the same. Next Gundry offers the word *δανιστή* which, again, only occurs in Luke. To his credit Gundry states that these words appear “in one form or another” in Matthew’s parable.² The question is how far the “form” of the word can be stretched. In light of the above arguments it seems safe to conclude that this is indeed unparalleled material.

¹ Robert Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 371.

² *Ibid.*, 371.

➤ Internal Tensions in the Parable

This second criterion is slightly more difficult to use than the first. It will, however, help the exegete to see the editorial hand of Matthew in M material. First, one is struck by the fact that the parable is placed immediately following a question by Peter about how often one should forgive a transgressor. Peter's question is about the number of times one should forgive an offender. The parable, on the other hand, speaks about the nature and proper results of true forgiveness, not about the number of times forgiveness should be offered. The question and the parable are linked topically, but it does not seem that the parable is a direct answer to Peter's question.³

Peter's question has to do with repeated forgiveness of an offender, a point to which the parable does not speak.⁴ Thus the placement of the parable seems to indicate at the very least that it need not temporally follow the previous incident. This may indicate that Matthew has written the introduction to the parable.

A second internal tension occurs in the conclusion to the parable. Verse 35 reads,

Οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν.

Two grammatical tensions are immediately apparent. First Matthew uses a plural pronoun (ὑμῖν) followed by singular (ἕκαστος). While this may simply be a grammatical idiosyncrasy,⁵ it is at the very least unusual for Matthew. The second grammatical irregularity is somewhat more substantial. Matthew uses two second person plural pronouns (ὑμῖν ὑμῶν), as well as the

³ This is noted by J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 106, when he states "It is not at all obvious how the succeeding parable is a good illustration of that saying of Jesus!"

⁴ See Jeremias, *Parables*, 97.

⁵ See Blass, F. and A. Debrunner. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated by Robert W. Funk. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.), §305.

second person plural verb (ἀφῆτε). Yet rather than the expected τῷ ἀδελφῷ ὑμῶν. (which is how Hagner reads the phrase despite the αὐτοῦ)⁶ the text reads τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ. This both argues against Gundry's conclusion that Matthew composed this narrative, as well as indicating that the conclusion of the parable is a Matthean redaction of a conclusion that may have already existed in another form.

➤ **The Use of Style and Vocabulary for Determining Matthean Redaction**

First, one must examine each word used in the parable in terms of Matthew's redactional use of it. Gundry offers such statistics (based upon his own decisions about what is redactional) in an appendix to his commentary.⁷ While each exegete must make his or her own decisions about what is and is not redactional, Gundry's statistics are a good point of entry into the redactional questions.

After one has examined each word, some decisions can be made. If the word is often used editorially by Matthew in areas where there are genuine parallels, it stands to reason that Matthew may have used the word in the same fashion here.

➤ **Cautions About These Redactional Decisions**

There are at least two cautions which should be kept in mind when dealing with the redaction of this material. The first is that the parable was, in all likelihood though not certainly, delivered originally in Aramaic.⁸ If it was Matthew who made the translation from Aramaic, to

⁶ Hagner, Matthew, 2:535.

⁷ Gundry, Matthew, Appendix.

⁸ For an examination of the languages of Jesus, M. Wise, "Languages in Palestine," in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, ed. J. B. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992).

Greek then one must be very careful with the statistical evidence. Words that are commonly used redactionally by Matthew could just as easily be commonly used in translation.

A second caution deals with the use of this kind of statistical evidence. At best, the exegete can only construct a probability argument. Given the lack of any other source for this parable, redactional additions can never be proven for certain.

➤ **Actual Redactional Decisions**

These decisions were not dealt with the body of the parable because of the cautions mentioned above, but we all the same seek to identify whether or not the introduction and the conclusion of the parable have been added by Matthew.⁹

Διὰ τοῦτο ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν

This seems to be a Matthean introductory formula for the following reasons.¹⁰ First the phrase Διὰ τοῦτο is used editorially by Matthew very often. Matthew uses the phrase ten times, as compared with Mark's three times, and Luke's four times. Of the ten times that Matthew uses the phrase, four are Matthean insertions or redactions (12:31; 13:13; 21:43; 24:44) and 2 are in M material (13:52; 18:23). While this analysis runs the risk of falling victim to the statistical problems pointed out by Carson, and thus the conclusions must be held to tentatively, it seems that this phrase does point to the hand of Matthew, rather than to the words of Jesus.

⁹ For a full redactional analysis of the parable, see de Boer, *Talents*.

¹⁰ Holding that the formula is a redaction are C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 19; T. Deidun, "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt. 18:23-35)," *BTB* 6 (1976): 206; and J. Jeremias, *Parables*, 210.

The word ὁμοιώθη occurs 8 times in Matthew, out of the total of 15 occurrences in the New Testament.¹¹ The rest of the phrase, which Gundry says “consists entirely of Mattheanisms,” seems to be just as distinctly Matthean.¹² The phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν occurs a total of 32 times in 31 verses, all of which occur only in Matthew (and are, in all likelihood, Matthean redactions).¹³ Thus, it seems clear that Διὰ τοῦτο ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν a Matthean introductory formula, used often by Matthew, but especially to introduce parables. This does not mean however that Jesus did not introduce many parables with an introductory formula like this or that he did not introduce this parable with some formula. I only mean to suggest that Matthew has ‘reshaped’ the introductory formula in wording, not that Jesus never intended for the parable be used in this manner.

Οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν.

Jeremias argues that this is the original conclusion to the parable which has been modified by Matthew.¹⁴ This points to one of the most severe methodological problems with redaction criticism of M material. Does the presence of Matthean words and phrases in the conclusion to the parable point to translation and/or modification by Matthew, or does it point to the fact that Matthew has created this conclusion with a view to pointing up the lesson that the story teaches? While it is, again, impossible to tell with certainty, this seems to be a Matthean

¹¹ Matthew 6:8; 7:24, 26; 11:16, 13:24; 18:23; 22:2; 25:1; Mark 4:30; Luke 7:31; 13:18; 13:20; Acts 14:11; Rom. 9:29; Hebrews 2:17. Matthew 6:8; 13:24; 18:23; 22:2; 25:1; are M material. On the use of this word to introduce parables, see D. A. Carson, “The ‘Homoios’ Word-Group as Introduction to Some Matthean Parables,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 277-82.

¹² Gundry, *Matthew*, 371.

¹³ Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19 (2 occurrences), 20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1.

¹⁴ Jeremias, *Parables*, 109.

conclusion to the parable (i.e., a Matthean redaction of what may have been an existing conclusion) for the following reasons.

First, Jeremias points out that the use of ἀδελφῶ with the restricted meaning of a member of the community is characteristic of Matthew.¹⁵ The word use statistics (in this phrase as well as in the whole pericope) point so completely to Matthew, that Gundry is convinced that the entire parable is a Matthean construction.¹⁶ Davies and Allison note that Οὕτως, πατήρ, μου, οὐράνιος, ἀφῆτε, ἀδελφῶ, and the instrumental use of ἀπο., are all characteristic of Matthean redaction.¹⁷

If one agrees that the chapter is not intended to be read as a temporal incident, i.e., as one long discourse, rather than a number of discourses grouped topically by Matthew, then the fact that this verse is a conclusion for the entire chapter argues in favor of it being a Matthean redaction. Thus it seems probable, but by no means certain, to see a Matthean introduction and conclusion to the parable. It is well to conclude this appendix section with a restatement of exactly what is intended by this redaction criticism. N. T. Wright puts it well by saying,

“of course Matthew arranged and ordered his material in such a way as to address the church of his day. But the story which he tells only means anything if it has to do with things that actually happened.”¹⁸

Thus this redaction criticism is only an attempt to determine what editorial effect Matthew has had on the parable, not an attempt to deny that Jesus actually spoke it.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109. Matthew uses the term 31 times in his gospel

¹⁶ Gundry, *Matthew*, 371.

¹⁷ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2:803, n. 64. Cf. the distinctive Matthean word lists in 1:75-9.

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 390.

¹⁹ That 18:35 is a redaction by Matthew is held by Leopold Sabourin, *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1982), 726; Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2:803; Gundry, *Matthew*, 371: That it is not a redaction is held by Morris, *Matthew*, 477 ; and Stanton, “Matthew as Interpreter,” 265: