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The Jewish Background to Interpersonal Forgiveness in Matthew

By Isaac Kahwa Mbabazi

This essay seeks to contribute to Matthean scholarship by reconsidering the debate on the Jewish background to interpersonal forgiveness in Matthew. It proposes that Sirach 28:1-7 is not only a possible Jewish background to the parable of the unmerciful debtor of Matthew 18:23-35, as has been argued, but also to the teaching in Matthew 6:12, 14-15. This claim rests on five underlying concepts shared by both the Matthean and Sirach passages: conditionality (ie, a condition to be met before we can be forgiven); reciprocity (ie, our forgiveness is related to our willingness to forgive); the link between mercy and forgiveness; reluctance to practise mercy and forgiveness; and God's judgement on those who refuse to practise mercy and forgiveness. There is also a link that exists between these first two concepts in both the Matthean and Sirach passages. And there is a further, complex link that exists between the final three concepts listed above, a link that can be seen in both Matthew and Sirach.

Framing the Inquiry

The context of Matthew's teaching about interpersonal forgiveness has been studied extensively. As has become well known, Matthew is set in the first-century CE, when some of Christianity's fundamental claims about forgiveness came to be articulated and perhaps slowly differentiated from those of Judaism.¹ As a Jew and someone raised within a Jewish culture, Jesus knew that God is gracious and forgiving, notions which are plain in the Old Testament. Controversy, however, surrounds the description of the rhetoric of forgiveness in the Old Testament and its rhetoric in the New Testament, and particularly in Matthew's Gospel. Some scholars have claimed that the first Gospel presents essentially the same understanding of forgiveness as the Old Testament.² David J. Reimer, however, has argued for the possibility of a gap between the idea of forgiveness in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Having studied carefully Jesus' statements on forgiveness in Matthew 6:12, 14-15 and 18:21-35, he notices that, unlike Matthew's Gospel where Jesus' statements on forgiveness place pivotal importance on interpersonal forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness is virtually

¹ Cf. for example the Pauline tradition (Rom 4:7; Eph 1:7; 4:32; Col 1:14; 2 Cor 2:7, 10), the Markan tradition (Mark 11:25-26) and the Lukan tradition (Luke 11:2-4; 17:3-4).

² E.g., F.C. Fensham, "The Legal Background of Mt. vi 12", *NovT* 4 (1960), 1-2; W. A. Quanbeck, "Forgiveness", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. George A. Buttrick, Nashville: Abingdon, (1962), 319.

absent from the Old Testament.³ He examines carefully the relevant forgiveness texts in the LXX: the stories of Jacob and Esau (Gen 32–33), Joseph and his brothers (Gen 45; 50:15-21), Saul and Samuel (1 Sam 15:24-31), David and Abigail-Nabal (1 Sam 25), Shimei and David (2 Sam 16:5-14; 19:16-23; 1 Kings 2:8-9, 36-46), together with the narrative in Sirach 28:1-7.⁴

To answer the question of how to bridge the gap between the Old Testament and New Testament (Matthew's Gospel in particular) on the teaching about interpersonal forgiveness, Reimer proposes the so-called "intertestamental period" (Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha) as a possible place where theological sense could be made of the two Testaments.⁵ Most relevant in these materials to the subject under enquiry is Sirach (28:1-7, cp. 5:4-7; 17:25-32; 18:8-14). In his treatment of the Sirach text, Reimer makes a reasonable connection between Sirach 28:1-4⁶ and other Sirach texts. He shows, for example, how in Sirach 5:4-7; 17:25-32; 18:8-14, notions of death and judgement sharpen the consideration of divine forgiveness. He points out that in Sirach 28:1-2, this combination of traditional Jewish concepts (death as punishment for sin, obedience to the commandments of the law and loyalty to the covenant) produces the conclusion that divine judgement can be influenced by human activity. Those who lack mercy, he argues, obstruct forgiveness from God when they seek it.⁷ Aspects of the teaching about forgiveness contained in Sirach 28:1-7 are similar to its teaching in Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:23-35 (cp. Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; Jas 2:13). Matthew 18:23-35 particularly links forgiving to judgement. On the ground of this thematic connection between 18:23-35 and 6:12, 14-15, one may think that the idea of "not being forgiven by the Father" in 6:15 implies punishment. Roger Mohrlang has the same feeling. Matthew 6:14-15 is listed among the texts in which he thinks judgement is implicit.⁸ The parallelism between Sirach 28:1-7 and Matthew 18:23-35 has made Reimer think of Sirach 28:4 as a possible basis for the parable of the unmerciful debtor (18:23-35).⁹ He suggests this from the conceptual structure of the two texts. This proposal is persuasive enough, and I endorse it. As an additional comment, because of the underlying idea of conditionality in them, a possibility that Reimer fails to notice, one may also

³ David J. Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology: The Case of Interpersonal Forgiveness", in *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason* (eds John Barton and David J. Reimer, Macon: Mercer University Press, (1996), 271-272.

⁴ David J. Reimer, "Stories of Forgiveness: Narrative Ethics and the Old Testament", in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (eds. Robert Rezetko, Timothy H. Lim and W. Brian Aucker, Leiden: Brill, 2007), 359-378.

⁵ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 276-277.

⁶ The content of this text is provided later in this essay where it is discussed at length.

⁷ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 279.

⁸ Roger Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul: a Comparison of Ethical Perspectives* (SNTSMS 48, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 51.

⁹ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 277-279.

think of Sirach 28:1-4 as a possible basis for the teaching in Matthew 6:12, 14-15; cp. Matthew 5:7; 7:1-2.

Reimer concludes his reflection as follows:

In the world of early Judaism and nascent Christianity, notions of interpersonal forgiveness overlap almost entirely. Despite the claims that have been made for the radical nature of Jesus' teaching on this subject, he was heir to an interpretative tradition which had already linked the love command to the idea of forgiveness and had begun to draw out some of the implications of this move. When Jesus' teaching is seen side by side with the Hebrew Bible, the distance between them is great. However, the *noncanonical* literature I have cited reflects the process of interpreting authoritative texts for their communities. And the range of concerns displayed by *these* communities – Jews and Christians around the turn of the era – on this issue are very similar (we might even say, the same).¹⁰

Reimer's careful analysis of the theme of interpersonal forgiveness in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is a valuable enterprise. His handling of the data in an attempt to establish the place where theological sense could be made of the two Testaments is quite reasonable. With regard to the interpersonal forgiveness theme in the Gospel of Matthew, Reimer's handling of the Matthean text is generally fair. He states the responsibilities of each party in the forgiveness process; that is, responsibility of granting forgiveness and that of seeking forgiveness. He notes, for example, the fact that in Matthew 5:23-24, it is the offender's obligations that are in view. He contrasts this text with its parallel in Mark 11:25, and points to the fact that in Mark it is the offended party's obligations that are in view. He then stresses that this teaching in Mark 11:25 is very much of a piece with that concluding the Matthean Prayer (6:14-15), with the exception that here the onus is placed on the offended person to freely forgive so as not to impede divine forgiveness.¹¹

Regarding Matthew 18:23-35, Reimer accurately locates the story of the unmerciful debtor in its immediate context of Peter's question (18:21) and of its wider context of Jesus' teaching on reconciliation between the community members (18:15-20) in the framework of Jesus' teaching on the maintenance of relationships in the community (Matt 18). He then notes that the picture given is of an offended party going to the offending party to point out the fault, returning with one or two others in the case of a negative response by the offending party, and ostracising (as he conceives it) the offending party who refuses to repent.¹²

There is, however, a point of uncertainty with Reimer's reading of the Matthean material: his interpretation of the fate of the potential unrepentant offender of 18:15-17. He seems to think that here forgiveness can be denied.

¹⁰ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 281 (italics original).

¹¹ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 269.

¹² Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 270-71.

He imagines that given a potential unrepentant offender, Jesus positively recommends forgiveness denial, although he also recognises that this appears to be in tension with the subsequent counsel to Peter (18:22) that forgiveness knows no limits.¹³ One wonders whether in 18:15-17 the focus of the Matthean Jesus' teaching is on the denial of forgiveness. This would contradict not only Jesus' subsequent counsel to Peter, as Reimer himself also recognises, but also the teaching in Matthew 18 as a whole, in which the emphasis is clearly on the responsibility of the offended person.

Conditionality: The Matthean Evidence

The idea of conditionality can be observed in the Gospel of Matthew. It is expressed through the concept of reciprocity and the link between mercy and forgiveness. In the fifth beatitude (Matt 5:7), for example, this idea is embodied in the "mercy for mercy" axiom: "Blessed are the merciful (οἱ ἐλεήμονες), for they will receive mercy (ἐλεηθήσονται)". The "mercy for mercy" principle is used in this verse to describe divine-human and interpersonal relationships: the disciples are to show mercy to their fellow humans if they are to expect to receive mercy from God. This principle comes to fuller expression in Matthew 6:12, 14-15 and in 18:23-35, as the structure below shows:

- 5:7 μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες... ἐλεηθήσονται
Blessed are **the merciful**... they **will receive mercy**
- 6:12 ἄφες... ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν
Forgive... **as** we also have forgiven
- 6:14 Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφήτε... ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος
For if you forgive... your heavenly Father will also forgive you
- 6:15 ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφήτε... οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει
But if you do not forgive... *neither* will your Father forgive
- 18:32b πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾳ σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με·
All that debt I forgave you, because you pleaded with me;
- 18:33 οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς κἀγὼ σὲ ἠλέησα;
Should you not also have had **mercy** on fellow slave, **in the same way that I** had **mercy** on you?

This structure highlights the key terminology in the relationship between the conditioned mercy and the conditioned forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount and in the Community Discourse. From the structure, it is possible to equate the conditioned mercy of Matthew 5:7 with the conditioned forgiveness of Matthew 6:12, 14-15. The idea of conditioned mercy embodied in Matthew 5:7 is apparently echoed in 6:12 (ἄφες... ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν), in Matthew 6:14 (Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφήτε... ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος) and in 6:15 (ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφήτε... οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει). Most interestingly, both ideas of conditioned mercy and conditioned forgiveness are juxtaposed in Matthew

¹³ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 271.

18:23-35 (v. 32b: *πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφῆκός σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με; v. 33: οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς κάρω σὲ ἠέλησα; v. 35: Οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατὴρ μου... ποιήσει ὑμῖν ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε...).*

On this basis, one can strongly suggest a thematic connection between the Beatitudes and the Prayer (plus 6:14-15), and between the Beatitudes and the parable in Matthew 18:23-35, and vice versa. David Hill was probably right when he suggested that Matthew 5:7 (“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”) echoes the approach of Jesus in the Prayer (“Forgive... as we have forgiven”) which the first Evangelist makes explicit in the comment on the Prayer in Matthew 6:14-15.¹⁴ R.T. France has gone further to include three texts: first, Matthew 7:1-2 in which the reciprocal judgement principle is stated directly and indirectly using the metaphor of measuring out commodities in the market,¹⁵ second, Matthew 7:12 where the reciprocal principle, broadly conceived, seems to be established; third, Matthew 18:21-35 where mercy and forgiveness are juxtaposed.¹⁶ The call to be perfect (τέλειός) as the heavenly Father is perfect (5:48) also supports this proposal. But France, Hill and Gore do not see the link between mercy and forgiveness as one of possible strategies of the first Evangelist to stress the importance of the interpersonal forgiveness theme in the Gospel. These passages may now be considered more closely. The discussion of them is not organised chronologically but thematically, with the purpose of helping the reader follow the flow of thought of the present author.

1. Conditionality in Matthew 5:7

The first statement about the theme of interpersonal forgiveness in the first Gospel can be discerned from Matthew 5:7. In this text, the idea of interpersonal forgiveness is stated indirectly by way of the reciprocal principle of “mercy for mercy”. Davies and Allison have aptly brought to our attention how significant the idea of mercy is to Matthew and to his first readers and hearers:

Matthew’s Jesus ... gives the demand for mercy renewed emphasis and vividness by placing it at the centre of his proclamation (9.13; 12.7; 23.23; 25.31-46) and by making it plain that mercy should be shown to all..., including not only those on the fringes of society but even enemies (5.43-8; cf. Luke 10.29-37).¹⁷

¹⁴ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New Century Bible; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972), 108; so also C. Gore, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Exposition* (London, 1896), 38-39.

¹⁵ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 168, 275. So also Bernard Couroyer, “De la mesure dont vous mesurez il vous sera mesuré” *Revue Biblique* 77 (1970), 366-370.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 707-708.

¹⁷ W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (vol. 1; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 455.

The Matthean call to practise mercy, as suggested by the literary frame of the Sermon on the Mount, is based upon God's nature and character. In the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the first Gospel, God is depicted as a merciful, loving and forgiving king and father.¹⁸ God's mercy is linked with his perfection, a perfection which the disciple is called to practise; this is stated indirectly in Matthew 5:7 using the divine passive and more directly in Matthew 5:48 (cp. Luke 6:36). This is a clear example of the *imitatio Dei* ('imitating God') in Matthew. In Matthew 5:7 this idea includes being merciful: as God is merciful to all, including his adversaries and enemies (Matt 5:47), so must his children and people be to one another.

2. Conditionality in Matthew 7:1-2

In Matthew 7:1-2, the measure for measure language is used to convey and highlight the idea of interpersonal forgiveness. This passage contains a warning addressed to the disciples. The warning in question is a prohibition against passing judgement on others at any time, and it is given in the context of interpersonal relationships. It is stated by means of a general moral maxim: Μὴ κρίνετε, ἵνα μὴ κριθῆτε, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (v. 1). The reason for the maxim is given (γάρ..., "for" [v. 2a]), and is stated by means of a double sentence: ἐν ᾧ γὰρ κρίματι κρίνετε κριθήσεσθε, καὶ ἐν ᾧ μέτρῳ μετρεῖτε μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν, "for with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (v. 2). Matthew 7:1-2 has no connection in thought with what immediately precedes. The literary structure of this text in Luke (6:37-42ff) indicates that these verses logically follow from 5:48 ("Be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect." NRSV), the point at which Matthew departed from his source to introduce the material gathered in Matthew 6. Matthew 7:2 is not simply a recommendation to be moderate in judgement on others. The meaning is rather that, if you condemn, you surely exclude yourself from God's forgiveness. The "measure" saying in verse 2 is also found in Mark 4:24b, where it refers to the spirit in which a person receives teaching. A possible meaning of Matthew 7:1-2 is thus: "If you want to be mercifully dealt with, show mercy as well". This is parallel to the meaning suggested for the preceding clause in verse 1.

3. Conditionality in Matthew 6:12, 14-15

A textual problem occurs in Matthew 6:12. There are three major readings of verse 12b; some manuscripts have the aorist ἀφῆκαμεν ("we have forgiven"),¹⁹ but others have the present ἀφίομεν ("we forgive")²⁰ or ἀφίεμεν ("we

¹⁸ The evidence for this is discussed in Isaac K. Mbabazi, "The Significance of Interpersonal Forgiveness in Matthew's Gospel" (PhD Thesis; The University of Manchester, 2011), 227-231.

¹⁹ This is the reading of the original hand of Codex Sinaiticus, as well as of B, Z and Family 1. Two early versions (Stuttgart edition of the Vulgate and Philoxenian Syriac version) translate this form of the verb; see Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (3rd rev. ed; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1985), 86.

forgive”).²¹ I prefer ἀφῆκαμεν (“we have forgiven”) because the aorist reading is attested in the most important and earliest Greek manuscripts, namely, codices Sinaiticus (Ⲭ) and Vaticanus (B).²²

Matthew 6:12, 14-15 belongs to the section Matthew 6:9-15 to do with prayer. Verses 12, 14-15 discuss conditionality in divine-human forgiveness explicitly using ἀφίημι to describe the divine-human interrelationships. In the petition in Matthew 6:12b, the disciples are instructed to ask their heavenly Father to forgive them ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφῆκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν (“as we also have forgiven our debtors”). At least two most important exegetical issues relating to the subject of interpersonal forgiveness can be identified in this text: first is the reading of ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς (“as we also”); second is the aorist tense ἀφῆκαμεν (“we have forgiven”).

To begin with the first point, the reading of the phrase ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς (“as we also”) is subject to much controversy. There are two alternatives: the first is the conditional reading of the connective, and the second, the non-conditional reading of it. The non-conditional reading has been endorsed by W. Hendricksen and F.D. Bruner, among others. Uncomfortable with the conditional reading of verse 12, they have argued against this reading for theological reasons. Hendricksen thinks that if the conditional interpretation is accepted, this would mean that our forgiving disposition earns God’s forgiveness.²³ This argument is biased; it is not true that the conditional reading of Matthew 6:12 (so also 6:14-15) necessarily entails the interpretation that forgiving earns God’s forgiveness. Bruner, on the other hand, in an attempt to avoid the expression “condition” for the clause ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς (“as we also”) ends up with a confusing statement:

In particular, the privilege of praying for the *Father’s* forgiveness – the meaning of the first part of the Fifth Petition – is placed by Jesus *before* the rider of *our* forgiveness of others. This means that Jesus reminds us of our standing privilege of access to the Father *before* he reminds us of our

²⁰ This is the reading of uncial codices D, L, W, Δ and Θ, as well as of a few other minuscules and possibly a Coptic manuscript; see Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 86.

²¹ This reading is supported by the first corrector of Codex Sinaiticus, as well as by Family 13. This is also the reading supported by the Majority text, by a *Didache* manuscript and possibly by a Coptic manuscript; see Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 86.

²² There is a good discussion on this problem in Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed; Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 13. Metzger and the Committee that worked on the UBS/Nestle-Aland text also prefer the aorist reading; see also Joel Delobel, “The Lord’s Prayer in the Textual tradition”, in *The New Testament in Early Christianity* (ed. Jean-Marie Sevrin; Louvain, 1989), 293-309.

²³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New Testament Commentary; Edinburgh: Banner, 1976), 334 (italics original).

standing responsibility of forgiving neighbours. This order, this sequence, makes me prefer the expression “consequence” to “condition” for the clause “as we, too, forgave those who failed us,” though the consequence is close to being a condition.²⁴

Bruner’s argument is not persuasive and lacks consistency. It is grounded in the visible aspect of the syntax; the underlying idea of the syntax itself seems not to be heeded. The non-conditional reading of Matthew 6:12 (cp. Matt 6:14-15) is on shaky ground because of the intrinsic motives of its defenders and the kind of evidence they use to secure it.

There are sound reasons to prefer the conditional reading of verse 12: the grammar of the text demands it and the co-text of the passage supports it. This reading is decisively substantiated by the explanatory comment in Matthew 6:14-15 which follows immediately the Prayer and is particularly related to the petition in verse 12. While it is implicit in verse 12, the conditional element becomes more explicit in verses 14-15, where an antithetical parallelism is used. This rhetorical device makes our reading both clearer and emphatic by being stated both positively and negatively. Jean Carmignac’s comment below on this conditional reading is to the point:

[I] faut reconnaître que cette présentation est en accord profond avec la pensée évangélique: ... Matthieu 6,14-15 reproduit sous une autre forme la même antériorité... à la fin de la parabole du débiteur impitoyable, Jésus en dégage lui-même la leçon...; enfin Matthieu 5,23-24 insiste plus clairement encore... Cette antériorité est une donnée ferme et constante de l’Évangile de Matthieu.²⁵

This statement recognises the straightforward conditional reading of the text and highlights the precedence of the human act of forgiving over the divine act of it in Matthew 6:12 and beyond.

Related to the discussion above is the issue of the tense ἀφήκαμεν (“we have forgiven”) of verse 12b, and this leads us to our second point. As was indicated earlier in this essay, there are three readings of ἀφίημι (“forgive”) in this verse. The aorist reading is to be preferred because it is attested in two most reliable uncial codices (X and B). The Matthean version of the account, using the aorist tense (ἀφήκαμεν, “we have forgiven”) gives the impression that God’s forgiveness depends upon human’s initiative, for the one praying seems

²⁴ Frederick D. Bruner, *Matthew: a Commentary* (vol. 1; rev. and exp. edn; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 311.

²⁵ My translation: “We must recognise that this presentation is in deeper accord with evangelical thought: ... Matthew 6, 14-15 reproduces in another form the same anteriority ... at the end of the parable of unmerciful debtor, Jesus in drawing himself the lesson ... ; finally Matthew 5, 23-24 again insists more clearly This anteriority is a firm and constant datum of the Gospel of Matthew.” Jean Carmignac, *Recherches sur le “Notre Père”* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1969), 231.

to request forgiveness to the extent that they themselves ἀφῆκαμεν (“have forgiven”) their debtors.

This aorist ἀφῆκαμεν, “we have forgiven” (against the Lukan present ἀφίεμεν, “we forgive”) clearly underpins the idea behind the conditional phrase ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς (“as we also”). As Todd Pokrifka-Joe has also noted, with this past tense the petition places significant responsibility on those praying to make sure they have *already* forgiven their fellow humans if they desire to be forgiven by God.²⁶

The juxtaposition of the aorist ἀφῆκαμεν, “we have forgiven” (v. 12b) and the conditional phrase ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς, “as we also” (v. 12b), as well as the antithetical parallelism in verses 14-15 indicate the precedence of human forgiveness over divine forgiveness. In reality, verse 14 takes up the petition for forgiving debts in verse 12, whereas verse 15 considers what would happen to potential unforgiving disciples: “[N]either will your Father forgive your trespasses” (v. 15b). It is thus reasonable to think that for Matthew, the refusal of forgiveness towards others leads to God’s refusal to forgive the unforgiving person.

This trend is an example of the notion of reciprocity in forgiveness and the link between reluctance in forgiving and the idea of judgement in Matthew 6:12, 14-15. In this text, this idea is stated in three ways: firstly, by means of the phrase ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς, “as we also” (v. 12); secondly, by the use of an antithetical parallelism in verses 14-15, a rhetorical device which serves to stress the consequences awaiting the potential unforgiving person; and thirdly, by the way in which conditional forgiveness is used in Matthew 6:12, 14-15 to characterise divine-human and interpersonal relationships. These last verses express the conditional mercy of Matthew 5:7, where showing mercy is said to be expected of the disciples if they are to expect to receive mercy from God.

4. Conditionality in Matthew 18:23-35

Matthew 18:23-35 belongs to the section to do with forgiving - Matthew 18:21-23. This section can be divided into three parts: the first part is about Peter’s question and Jesus’ answer (18:21-22), and focuses on the frequency of forgiving; the second part concentrates on failure in showing readiness to forgive (18:23-34); and the third part focuses on what will befall the unforgiving person (18:35). In this third part, the idea of punishment, which was implicit in Matthew 6:15, becomes explicit; the saying in it parallels the one in Matthew 6:15: *not being forgiven*. Matthew 18:23-35 contains teaching about reluctance to forgive and God’s response to the unforgiving person. A parable is used to

²⁶ Todd Pokrifka-Joe, “Probing the Relationship between Divine and Human Forgiveness in Matthew”, in *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology* (eds Alistair I. McFadyen, Marcel Sarot and Anthony Thiselton; Edinburgh/New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 166.

convey and stress this teaching. Apart from an introduction (v. 23), the parable consists of three clear scenes: the first scene takes place between the king and his slave (vv. 24-27), the second between the slave and his fellow slave (vv. 28-30), and the third once again between the king and his slave (vv. 31-34). Each scene has almost the same form, beginning with a narrative introduction (vv. 24-25, 28, 31) and closing with a description of what the creditor does with the debtor (vv. 27, 30, 34). The third scene is most relevant for the purposes of this study.

The third scene (vv. 31-34) takes place between the king and his slave. The other slaves, having seen how their fellow slave (the creditor) had behaved towards one of them, are greatly distressed. Because of their sympathy for their fellow slave in trouble, they go to their lord and tell him what has happened. On hearing this report, the lord is so shocked that he immediately takes appropriate action against this unmerciful slave.

All that has taken place in scene two (vv. 28-30) is narrated to the lord by the σύνδουλοι “fellow slaves”), who recognise the terrible hypocrisy of a man who received kindness but could not give it. What they felt over the fate of their fellow slave is described ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα (“they were exceedingly grieved”). This phrase also occurs elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel, where it describes the disciples’ feeling on hearing from their Lord what was to happen to him (17:23); it also occurs in LXX (Neh 5:6; Jon 4:4, 9). This description expresses a combination of feelings that Ceslas Spicq has aptly described as “tristesse, indignation et dégoût”²⁷ (i.e., “sadness, indignation and disgust”). Whether anger is also to be read in the fellow slaves’ feeling is, however, not certain. It is reasonable to think that the hearers of this parable would also naturally have the same kind of feelings.

Not only did these slaves have feelings (v. 31a); they also took action: καὶ ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἑαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα, “and coming, they reported to their lord all that had happened” (v. 31b). They went to their lord to inform him of what had happened. The expression διεσάφησαν... πάντα is used to describe the action of informing. Διασαφέω (“to report”), which is used here, occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, where it is used to describe the disciples’ request to Jesus (Matt 13:36). Although this verb is used in a different context, in both cases it means something like *to say point-blank*, or *make clear*. Here in verse 31, these slaves made everything (πάντα) plain to the lord. That is, they explained exactly what had happened, providing any detail they deemed useful. They knew of the cancellation of this unmerciful slave’s colossal debt. Although the text does not say that they used a spokesperson, it is not unreasonable to think that they did, supplying him with the any details he might have forgotten. It would be strange for a crowd of slaves to come to the king and just begin to speak.

²⁷ Ceslas Spicq, *Dieu et l’homme* (Lectio Divina 29; Paris: Cerf, 1961), 59, n. 2.

The feelings and the action of these slaves on behalf of their fellow in trouble raise two important questions. First: What kind of relationship existed among δοῦλοι/σύνδουλοι (“slaves”/“fellow slaves”) of the same κύριος (“lord”), and what was the extent of such relationship. Second: What is the extent to which a grasp of this is most likely to shed light on the audience’s understanding of the unity, sympathy and action of the other slaves towards the fellow slave in trouble? It is significant that compassionate humanity underlies both their motivation and action. Perhaps through this, Matthew wanted to encourage his readers and hearers to remain united as one family for their survival, no matter the circumstances in which they may find themselves.

The reaction of the lord now follows, and does two things: it reminds the slave of the mercy he had received and the reason for granting it; it also describes the imminent action that the lord is now going to take against this unmerciful slave. The lord does not require any explanation from this slave. Having summoned him, he immediately addresses him thus: Δοῦλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾳ σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με· οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς κἀγὼ σὲ ἤλεῆσα, “You wicked slave, all that debt I forgave you because you pleaded with me! Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?” (vv. 32-33).

A social *deixis*²⁸ (here a vocative) is used to introduce the lord’s address to his debtor. The lord uses a rhetorical question, a question that does not expect an answer. This rhetorical question can be divided in two main parts. To begin with, in the first part the lord addresses the slave as a δοῦλος πονηρός (“wicked slave”). This same expression appears elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel to describe the master’s response to one of his slaves (25:26). This remark of the lord here in verses 32-33 comprises two parts: in the first part the lord reminds the slave that he has cancelled his entire debt, and in the second, the reason for this previous act of generosity is recalled. To begin with the first item, the reminder reads as follows: πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾳ σοι, “all that debt I forgave you” (v. 32). Here πᾶσαν (“all”) is a discourse *deixis*. It is emphatic given its syntactical position in the clause; the lord reminds this slave of all that debt (πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην, “all that debt”), which he cancelled for him (ἀφήκᾳ σοι, “I forgave you”). The word πᾶσαν (“all”), to be sure, echoes the slave’s previous promise in verse 26 (πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι, “everything I will repay you”). The lord also adds the reason why he did so: ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με (“because you pleaded with me”). The conjunction ἐπεὶ (“because”) is probably a causal *deixis*. It seems to suggest that the lord cancelled the debt of the unmerciful slave because this slave pleaded for

²⁸ *Social deixis* is reference to the social characteristics of, or distinctions between, the participants or referents in a speech event.

patience. In reality, however, the lord cancelled the debt out of pure merciful generosity, rather than because of the plea itself.

In the second part of the rhetorical question above, the lord goes on to take back the forgiveness he generously granted, as he now demands that the debt be paid in full: οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς καὶ γὰρ σὲ ἠλέησα, “Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?” (v. 33). This is a good example of conditionality, and shows the link between reluctance in showing mercy (or forgiving) and the resultant judgement. The lord’s own behaviour is based on the behaviour of the slave towards his fellow slave; the lord treats him as he himself has treated his fellow slave. In so doing, Matthew restates explicitly the *conditioned* forgiveness and *conditioned* mercy. This echoes the fifth beatitude in Matthew 5:7, where the concept is embodied in the “mercy for mercy” saying: “Blessed are the merciful (οἱ ἐλεήμονες), for they will receive mercy (ἐλεηθήσονται)”. The disciples are to show mercy to their fellow humans if they are to expect to receive mercy from God. This principle comes to fuller expression in Matthew 6:12, 14-15 and 18:32b-35. In Matthew 7:1-2, the reciprocal principle is stated both directly with regard to judgement, and indirectly using the metaphor of measuring out commodities in the market.²⁹ In Matthew 7:12, this reciprocal principle seems to be established; and in Matthew 18:21-35 mercy and forgiveness are juxtaposed.³⁰ The call to be perfect (τέλειός) in Matthew 5:48, as the heavenly Father is perfect, also adds to the evidence.

In this vein, Davies and Allison have suggested the *imitatio Dei* (“imitating God”) motif. For them, beneath Jesus’ saying in Matthew 5:7 is the idea that God, the king of all, must be imitated in his goodness: the one forgiven should have acted in kind, the one act of mercy should have begotten another.³¹ Logically, because of what he had received from his lord, this slave was expected to act similarly towards his fellow slave. Sadly, he did not act as expected. Eta Linnemann’s comment on the character of mercy is pertinent: “Clearly mercy is essentially not something which we can accept with a feeling of relief at having got away with it once more, only to let things go on again just as we used to. It appears to have the character of an ordinance, just as justice is an ordinance”.³²

The lord is filled with anger and revokes his earlier cancellation of the slave’s exorbitant debt. His verdict this time is severe as he hands this slave over to the βασανισταῖς (“torturers”) for a suitable punishment. The term βασανισταῖς (“torturers”) is a New Testament *hapax legomenon*. Its use here serves to stress the severity of the punishment, as Davies and Allison have

²⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 168, 275. Also Couroyer, *Revue Biblique*, 366-70.

³⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 707-8.

³¹ Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 2.802.

³² Eta Linnemann, *The Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (London: SPCK, 1966), 111.

also suggested.³³ It has been observed that torturers, though disallowed by the Jews, were common in Roman prisons. In the case of unpaid debt, friends and relations would have accordingly been more urgent in raising money.³⁴ According to Josephus, Herod the Great did employ torture.³⁵ This slave is to be tortured until the debt was fully paid. The expression used to describe this fact is *πᾶν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον* (i.e., “everything owed”). A similar expression occurs elsewhere in Matthew’s Gospel (5:26) and is used of a potential brother or sister who has wronged another. It is easy to see that verse 34 is the close counterpart of verse 30, which describes in similar language this forgiven slave putting his fellow slave in prison until his debt was paid. It teaches that as one treats others, so also will one be treated. This point is made explicit in the application of the parable in verse 35.

The enormity of the debt has led some to think that this imprisonment would have been permanent. They also think that this, together with the reference to the torturers, hints at eschatological punishment.³⁶ It is interesting that this wicked slave does not dare to ask for patience as he did before (Matt 18:26, 29), perhaps because he has realised how wicked he was. In Davies and Allison’s words, “He knows he stands condemned.”³⁷ Would this lord once again have mercy on him if he had asked for it? It would be strange if this slave had asked for the lord’s mercy once more and was granted it. As one would have expected, the third scene closes with a terrible ending. The storyteller adds to it a comment to serve as the moral of the story (v. 35).

Building upon verse 34, in verse 35 Matthew presents his own view about God’s appropriate response to the disciples’ unwillingness to forgive; punishment is this response. Kyle Snodgrass has argued that “[t]he focus on judgment in this parable should be compared to other parables of judgment, specially the parables of the Wheat and the Weeds and of the Rich Man and Lazarus and the parables of future eschatology.”³⁸ This is not quite right because the judgement in this parable is not just a general judgement, as is the case with these parables, but a specific one. It takes the form of punishment and applies to the unmerciful and unforgiving person. It can be linked to the situation described in other texts dealing with interpersonal forgiveness and related topics in Matthew (5:7; 6:15; 7:1-2).

Matthew 18:35 poses the fundamental question of whether the believer can still experience the judging Father as the same Father who ever forgives

³³ Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 2.802.

³⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (vol. 33B; ed. Ralph P. Martin; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1995), 540.

³⁵ Josephus, *War* 1.548.

³⁶ Hagner, *Matthew*, 540, Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 2.803, among others.

³⁷ Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 2.802.

³⁸ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: a Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 61.

humans in interminable love. Related questions include the following: Can God, who has forgiven all human sins, withdraw his act of grace? Does the idea of judgement negate grace's reliability? What follows is an attempt to answer some of these questions or aspects of them.

The phrase οὕτως καὶ (“and so” [v. 35]) is a discourse *deixis*. Its function and the rendering of it are not obvious. It points back to verse 34, where it is reported that filled with anger the lord not only revokes his earlier cancellation of the unmerciful slave's exorbitant debt, but also hands him over to the torturers. But οὕτως καὶ also points to other Matthean interpersonal forgiveness texts and related texts because of the underlying concept of reciprocity in them, and the idea of a judgement that results from a refusal to forgive. Because 18:35 (“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive... from your heart.”) is an expansion of Matthew 6:14-15 (“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”), which is related to Matthew 5:7 (“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”) and Matthew 7:1-2, 12 (“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”), the *logion* in Matthew 18:35 also refers to these other interpersonal forgiveness and related texts.

As to the rendering of οὕτως καὶ (“and so”), the meaning Schottroff has assigned to these two words is interesting. She has translated οὕτως καὶ by a full sentence: “How is this, then, to be compared to the kingdom of God?”³⁹ The question is not whether it is reasonable to translate two terms by a whole sentence, but rather whether the translation provided is plausible. The translation above by Schottroff is problematic. Her approach to the parable itself may perhaps be the cause of the difficulty. The unpleasantness of the king's actions in the parable, refusing to consider further forgiveness, together with her desire to counter this impression, has led Schottroff to argue that this king is intended to portray what God is *not* like.⁴⁰ Schottroff's approach to this parable, and particularly her reading of οὕτως καὶ in verse 35, is an attempt to avoid the straightforward reading of the parable and the verse, and are altogether invalid. In Matthew 18:35 οὕτως καὶ means “so also”.

It is interesting that the judgement in this text comes from the πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος (“my heavenly Father”). The language of the fatherhood of God abounds in the Sermon and in the Community Discourse from which our two forgiveness texts are taken. As Robert H. Gundry has said, the manner in

³⁹ Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 196.

⁴⁰ A similar observation is made by Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 70.

which the heavenly Father will deal with the unforgiving disciple leaves no room for misunderstanding the parable, and therefore no excuse for failure to forgive. The expression ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν (“from your heart”) is important for the discussion. It also occurs in *T. Gad* 6:7: ἄφες αὐτῷ ἀπὸ καρδίας (“I forgive you from the heart”). In Matthew 18:35, it expresses sincerity and excludes all casuistry and legalism, as France has also suggested.⁴¹ The phrase ἀπὸ καρδίας (“from the heart”) shows that hypocrisy has no part in the kind of forgiveness that God demands. But the warning character of the parable shows that forgiving out of obedience need not kill sincerity, for a true disciple wants to obey his master.⁴² Commenting on the statement ἀπὸ καρδίας (“from the heart”), Luz says that forgiveness of sins involves both outward reconciliation with one’s brothers and sisters and complete affirmation of them.⁴³ Sincerity is thus at the core. As Luz also notes, brotherly forgiveness is no incidental matter, and unkindness among persons is a serious sin. Both of them lie at the heart of one’s relationship to God.⁴⁴

The concept of reciprocity, the link between mercy and forgiveness, and the punishment of those who fail to show mercy are all evident in Matthew 18:23-35. The idea of *conditional* forgiveness is employed to characterise divine-human and interpersonal relationships. The ideas of *conditional* forgiveness and *conditional* mercy are juxtaposed (πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾳ σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με, “all that debt I *forgave* because you led with me!” [v. 32b]; οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλέησαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς καὶ γὰρ σὲ ἠλέησα “Should you not also have had *mercy* on your fellow slave as I had *mercy* on you?” [v. 33]). Finally, there is an express link between reluctance in exercising mercy and forgiveness, and the idea of punishment (οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατὴρ μου... ποιήσει ὑμῖν ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε..., “So also my heavenly Father... will do to you if you do not forgive...”, [v. 35]). From this, it is not unreasonable to equate the *conditional* mercy of Matthew 5:7 with the *conditional* forgiveness of Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Matthew 18:23-35, as well as with Matthew 5:48 and 7:1-2, 12.

Summarising the Argument Thus Far

In Matthew’s Gospel we see the idea of reciprocity, the idea of conditionality, the link between mercy and forgiveness and the punishment that comes for reluctance to practise mercy/forgiveness. For the first Evangelist, refusing to show mercy to or to forgive others leads to God’s refusal to do the same to the unmerciful or unforgiving person. More than that,

⁴¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 278.

⁴² Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: a Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 375.

⁴³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: a Commentary* (vol. 2; Hermeneia; ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 476.

⁴⁴ Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 2.476.

it calls for punishment upon them. This is powerfully stated in the parable of the unmerciful debtor in Matthew 18:23-35 and implicitly in Matthew 6:15. Demands to be merciful (Matt 5:7), not to retaliate (Matt 5:21-23), and not to judge (Matt 7:1-2) are also implied in this reading.⁴⁵ This brings about the notion of accountability in forgiving.

Sirach 28:1-7 and Matthew 6:12, 14-15

The idea of accountability as related to mercy and forgiveness is very rare in biblical Judaism. Sirach 28:1-7 is the only very close early Jewish parallel. Verses 1-4 are most relevant for the purposes of this study; it reads as follows:

¹The vengeful person will face the Lord's vengeance, for he keeps an exacting account of their sins. ²Remit your neighbour the wrong they have done (ἄφες ἀδίκημα τῷ πλησίον⁴⁶ σου), and then your sins will be remitted when you pray (δεηθέντος σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου λυθήσονται). ³Does anyone harbour anger against another and expect healing from the Lord? ⁴If one has no mercy towards another like themselves, can they then seek forgiveness for their own sin? (καὶ περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτοῦ δεῖται.)

The co-text of this passage, Sirach 27:30–28:11, addresses various related issues. It is part of a larger literary unit Sirach 27:22–28:26 in which we have a series of poems on various topics: first is malice (Sir 27:22-27); second are anger and vengeance (Sir 27:28–28:1); third is forgiveness (Sir 28:2-7); fourth is quarrelling (Sir 28:8-11); and fifth, evils of the tongue (Sir 28:12-16; 28:17-26). As to the poem in Sirach 28:2-7, it addresses the duty of forgiving and not holding grudges, as P.W. Skehan has also noted.⁴⁷ Two verbs are used in the passage cited above to convey the idea of forgiveness: ἀφίημι (“forgive”) and λύω (“loose”). As noted earlier, this is the sole explicit LXX text in which forgiving is shown as a condition for both seeking and receiving God's forgiveness. In this text, πλησίος (the “person”, “neighbour”) and ἀδίκημα or ἁμαρτίαι (“sin(s)”) are direct objects of the verbs. As to λύω, its range of meanings includes to “loose”, “untie”, “set free”, “release” and “deliver”.⁴⁸ The co-text of Sirach 28:2, to do with God's vengeance hanging over the vengeful and unforgiving person, demands that both ἀφίημι and λύω be understood to mean something like to “forgive” in the sense of remit.

⁴⁵ Note that the ideas of retaliation and punishment are closely related in Greek thinking, as is clear in the word ἀντιτίνω; cf. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed revised and augmented by Henry S. Jones; Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 164.

⁴⁶ Note grammatical oddity of τῷ πλησίον, thanks to Dr Peter Oakes and Prof. George Brooke for having brought to my attention that this word is used widely in its adverbial (accusative) form as an indeclinable noun.

⁴⁷ P. W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 362.

⁴⁸ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1068-1069.

The concept of reciprocity and the link between mercy and forgiveness is plain in Sirach 28:1-7. The petitioner forgiving others is linked with the Lord forgiving them. Stated rhetorically, it is unthinkable that the unmerciful person should dare to seek God's forgiveness and expect to receive it; for, as Reimer has stated, "Those who lack mercy obstruct forgiveness from God when they seek it."⁴⁹ As J.L. Crenshaw has also observed, verses 2-5 insist that anyone who desires forgiveness from the Lord must first exercise that compassion towards their fellow humans, including their enemies.⁵⁰ This desire for God's forgiveness is here interestingly set in the context of prayer.

The teaching about forgiveness contained in Sirach 28:1-7 (esp. 2-4) is similar to the teaching about forgiveness in Matthew 6:12, 14-15; 18:32-35 (so also Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4; James 2:13). Two observations in this respect are worth noting. Firstly, in both Sirach 28:1-7 and Matthew 6:12, 14-15, the concept of conditionality in forgiveness emerges in the context of prayer, a phenomenon which can also be observed in Mark 11:25[-26] and in Luke 11:2-4. The situation described in Sirach 28:1-7 is closer to the one in Matthew 6:9-15. In both texts, the connection between forgiveness and prayer seems to stress the importance of the horizontal and vertical relationships. Secondly, both Sirach 28:1-7 and Matthew 6:9-15 connect the notion of reluctance in forgiveness to that of judgement. In Sirach 28:1-7, anger and wrath are directed at unforgiving people. This has a parallel in Matthew 5:22 where anger with an ἀδελφός ("brother") makes one liable to judgement. The emphasis here is on God's vengeance on those who eventually fail to forgive others. This same emphasis underlies the teaching in Matthew 18:23-35 (cp. Matt 7:1-2) and is alluded to in 6:15 through the statement "not being forgiven by the Father".

Because of the similarity between the Matthean material and the Sirach material, Sirach 28:4 has been proposed as a possible basis for the parable of the unmerciful debtor of Matthew 18:23-35. Reimer, for example, in his treatment of Sirach 28, has made a connection between Sirach 28:1-7 and other texts within Sirach. To repeat aspects of what was said earlier, Reimer has shown how in Sirach 5:4-7; 17:25-32; 18:8-14, notions of death and judgement sharpen the consideration of divine forgiveness. He notes that in Sirach 28:1-2, this combination of traditional Jewish concepts (death as punishment for sin, obedience to the commandments of the law and loyalty to the covenant) produces the conclusion that divine judgement is controlled by human activity. Most particularly, Reimer suggests that Sirach 28:4 is a possible basis for the parable of Matthew 18:23-35.⁵¹ Matthew 6:15 may also be based on Sirach 28, as both share the concept of reciprocity, a link between mercy and forgiveness, and the concept of punishment for not

⁴⁹ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 276-277.

⁵⁰ J. L. Crenshaw, "The Book of Sirach", 5.772.

⁵¹ Reimer, "The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology", 277-279.

forgiving/being merciful (cf. the idea of “*not being forgiven* by the heavenly Father”). For Matthew, the refusal of forgiveness towards others leads to God’s refusal to forgive the unforgiving person.

The concept of reciprocity found in Matthew 18:23-35 and Matthew 6:12 may allow one to suggest that Matthew 18:23-35 is the parabolic equivalent of Matthew 6:12.⁵² It is worth adding that, although Matthew 18:23-35 and Matthew 6:12 share between them the concept of reciprocity in forgiveness, they also have in common the notion of judgement on the potential unforgiving person – a fact which is not always highlighted in scholarship.

Warranting mention is punishment as the outcome of reluctance in forgiving; this is one of distinctive elements of the Matthean teaching about the concept of reciprocity and the link between mercy and forgiveness. In the Gospel of Matthew, the sense of accountability in showing mercy or in forgiving is stronger than in any other New Testament writings.

Conclusion

The present investigation has contributed to Matthean studies by considering the debate on the Jewish background to the theme of interpersonal forgiveness in the first Gospel. It has argued that Sirach 28:1-7 is not only a possible Jewish background to the parable of the unmerciful debtor of Matthew 18:23-35, but also to the teaching found in Matthew 6:12, 14-15. This claim is justified by the underlying idea of conditionality, the shared notion of reciprocity, the link between mercy and forgiveness, the reluctance in practising them and the judgement that follows. All these are evident in the Sirach text, the Matthean texts and elsewhere in the Gospel.

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⁵² E.g., Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, 1.610, among others.

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