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FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12, 'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'. First the text itself will be examined, then the basic interpretation set forth, and finally an effort will be made to discern nuances in Matthew by comparison with the other two Synoptic Gospels, especially Luke.

I. TEXT

'*Forgive us . . . as we forgive . . .*' In both instances the Greek verb is the same, *aphiemi*, which is also used in the parallel in Luke 11:4. Radically it is a verb of motion, and the prefix makes it motion away from; 'to send away', 'discharge', 'let go from one's hands', 'give up': these convey the primary sense of the word, and it is easy to see how the derived meanings flow from the primary: 'to set free (a person)', 'to get rid of (a thing)', and in the legal sense 'to remit a charge'.¹ It is a common word in extrabiblical Greek literature, but the interesting thing to note is that it never has a religious sense in these writings. In the LXX, however, it not only translates several Hebrew verbs corresponding to the above meanings, but also three verbs meaning 'to forgive', and thereby often has God as its subject, which is never the case in profane literature.² This septuagintal use of the word gives it a significant modification which must be kept in mind; it would be untrue to consider it purely as a juridical term with nothing but legal overtones, taken over into religious usage. The Old Testament background requires that it be understood more in a cultic than in a legal sense.

'Our *debts* . . . our *debtors*.' The word-group of *opheilo* is very common in Greek profane literature, meaning a money-debt, and it is found in this literal sense also in the LXX, e.g. Deut. 15:2. But again

¹ cf. Stefan Porubčan SJ, *Sin in the Old Testament*, Rome 1963, 121. Also Rudolf Bultmann, *aphiemi*, *TWzNT* (Kittel) I, 506-9; W. A. Quanbeck, 'Forgiveness', *Interp. Dict. of Bible*, NY 1962, II, 314-19.

² Bultmann, *loc. cit.*, 507.

it is a word which has acquired special nuances in the Bible, for it is never used in a religious sense in extra-biblical writings.¹ In the Old Testament however, the idea that sin makes men debtors before God gradually evolved, probably under the combined influence of cult and prophetic preaching; it is not difficult for instance to see how such a notion could develop from such passages as Num. 5:6-8. The LXX itself does not use *opheilo* in this sense, but the way has been fully prepared for such usage. In the New Testament this word-group is found in all but six books (Mark, 1 & 2 Pet., James, Jude, Apoc.).² It is used in both its literal and figurative senses.

There are more textual variants in this than in any of the other petitions of the Lord's Prayer. This itself is an indication of the difficulties that have often been felt as to precise details of Matthew's version. Three points call for brief attention:

1. Matthew has the plural *opheilemata*, while the Didache has the singular, and Luke has a different word, *hamartias* = sins.³ The singular is commoner, but the very fact that Matthew uses it in 18:32, thus showing that he knows this form, is an argument for the authenticity of the plural here. Luke has simply clarified the sense of 'debt' in its religious usage.⁴ Lohmeyer contends that the plural gives more colour here than the commonplace singular would.⁵

2. Instead of Matthew's *hos kai*, Luke has *kai gar* as the connective. Efforts to determine the relationship of human forgiveness to divine forgiveness have sometimes been attempted on the basis of these particles, but with little success. Both evangelists apparently reflect the same Aramaic *ke*, and the *kai* seems to be a Greek pleonasm with no counterpart in the Aramaic original.⁶

3. The major difference between Matthew's and Luke's versions of this petition is the *tense* of the second verb. Matthew has the aorist *aphekamen*, and Luke has the present *aphiomen*. The conjectured Aramaic original is also central to the understanding of this problem. Dalman says that Matthew's expression prescind from the temporal, expressing rather timeless forgiveness,⁷ while Lohmeyer similarly sees Matthew as expressing a purely logical (not chronological) relation

¹ W. Hauck, *opheilo*, *TWzNT* (Kittel) V, 559-65.

² *ibid.*

³ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Vater-Unser*, Zürich 1952, 3te. Aufl., 111.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ cf. Henri Van den Bussche, *Understanding the Lord's Prayer*, tr. by C. Shaldenbrand, London 1963, 125. Also Gustaf Dalman, *Die Worte Jesu*, Band I, 2te Aufl., Leipzig 1930, 338. And Lohmeyer, *op. cit.* 126f.

⁷ Dalman, *op. cit.*, 340.

between God's and man's forgiveness;¹ but a suggestion of Jeremias removes any difference between Matthew and Luke, precisely on the basis of Aramaic. He explains that 'in Aramaic the perfect is often a so-called *perfectum praesens*, indicating an action that takes place here and now. Thus the correct translation would be "as we herewith forgive our debtors"'.²

More could easily be said about the Aramaic antecedents of this verse, and we shall have occasion to return at a later point to consider the question of literary style, but for the moment let it simply be noted that on this particular petition there seems to be little disagreement about the original Aramaic vocabulary and syntax. Torrey, Dalman, Burney and Kuhn all conjecture that the two key words in Aramaic were *sebak hobin*, the common expression for remitting debts.³

From the foregoing it is evident that there is no great difficulty as to the general sense of this petition. Still, there is room for a few precisions before going on to a wider consideration of the place forgiveness holds in Matthew.

(1) concerning the nature of man's *debt*. The idea that man *owes* everything to God because he has received all he is and has from God is easily found in the Bible, whether from the creation-account of Genesis or the thanksgiving-prayers in the Psalms. But, as the variant in Luke makes clear and the verb 'forgive' demands, the debts here concerned are solely misdeeds, sins, failures to keep God's law properly, breaches of moral order. Therefore, as Hauck points out, Lohmeyer seems unjustified in bringing in the notion of man's general indebtedness to God at this point.⁴ To owe gratitude to someone is quite different than to owe reparation, since an offence is involved in the latter alone, even though we speak of both as debts. Only this latter sense of debt is justified in the context of Matt. 6:12.

(2) concerning the nature of man's *debtors*. In view of the above, the sense of this word would also seem to be clear. Yet a recent study seems deserving of attention, since it concerns the precise meaning

¹ Lohmeyer, *op. cit.*, 127.

² Joachim Jeremias, 'The Lord's Prayer in Modern Research', *Expository Times* 71 (1959-60), 146. The present tense in the Vulgate reading *dimittimus* cannot be insisted upon; F. C. Burkitt, *JTS* 33 (1932), 253-5, contends that the evidence points to the variant reading *dimisimus* as very early and actually favoured by St Jerome. On the other hand, to understand the aorist in a temporal sense creates no great difficulty; cf., e.g., Hauck, *op. cit.*, 563, 'Der Aorist des MT spricht den Ernst der Versöhnungsbereitschaft durch die vollbrachte Tat, das Präsens des LK durch die stete Bereitschaft zur Vergebung aus.'

³ cf. Dalman, *op. cit.*, 335; C. F. Burney, *The Poetry of Our Lord*, Oxford 1925, 112f.; Karl G. Kuhn, *Achtzehngebet und Vaterunser und der Reim*, Tübingen 1950, 33. Kuhn bases his reconstruction on the work of Torrey and Burney, but especially of Dalman.

⁴ Lohmeyer, *op. cit.*, 118, criticised by Hauck, *op. cit.*, 562.

and background of this word. Appearing in 1960, an article of F. C. Fensham contends that Christ here refers to an abuse in the society of his day. In the ancient Near East creditors had the right to take their debtors into slavery if they failed to repay as agreed. Although the Old Testament prohibited this, the very making of laws to protect the rights of 'credit-slaves' shows that the practice took place and was upheld even in the time of Jeremias (34:8). There is, claims Fensham, some reason to believe that it still occurred in New Testament times, judging from Rabbinic literature. Thus, 'Is it not possible that Christ refers to the practice in the second part of the fifth petition?'¹ Arguing on the close parallel between Matthew 6:12 and Deut. 15:2 (LXX), where both keywords are the same, he feels this is what Christ really means: 'Forgive us our debts (sins), as we also *release our credit-slaves*.'

While admitting the value of the interesting material brought forward, and acknowledging that such background may well serve to help us appreciate the overtones of the vocabulary employed, I find the interpretation far-fetched. Even if the social practice of credit-slavery was prevalent in the time of Christ (which is none too firmly established), there is still the further question as to whether it was likely to be prevalent among the followers of Christ for whom the prayer is intended. And even, for the sake of argument, making the further concession that it was, the general nature of the other petitions would seem to militate against this one being so limited. The very nature of the Paternoster as a *model* for all Christians at prayer would seem to demand a broader sense. Moreover, the same conclusion would seem to be demanded in view of similar passages elsewhere in Matthew which accent the need for all manner of fraternal forgiveness; we are to 'forgive others the *wrongs* (*paraptomata* = false steps, transgressions, blunders)² they have done'. (Matt. 6:14). It is furthermore an action that is to be performed frequently, which would not ordinarily be the case in releasing credit-slaves; 'Lord, *how often* am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?' Jesus replied, 'I do not say seven times; I say seventy times seven' (Matt. 18:21f.). For all these reasons, then, it is unwarranted, in my opinion, to consider the primary *literal sense* of these words to refer to such a social abuse as credit-slavery; at most, the terms might be consciously taken from such a practice and used *analogically*, applying to all instances where my neighbour is culpably in debt to me. Only thus is the parallel between the two parts of the petition maintained.

¹ F. Charles Fensham, 'The Legal Background of Matthew 6:12', *Novum Testamentum* 4 (1960), 1-2.

² cf. Porubčan, *op. cit.*, 117.

(3) concerning the *uniqueness* of such a teaching. We can only touch on this problem in passing, as seems fitting. Ecumenical honesty requires at least this much, for in the past it has not always been recognised that there are some striking antecedents to this teaching in earlier Jewish writings. It does little credit to Christian scholars and serves no useful purpose to overlook this by claiming all manner of uniqueness for this Christian doctrine of forgiveness. For instance, Fr. Gächter claims that Christ here broadens Jewish teaching in two ways: (a) not just one's *neighbour* (as in Sir. 28:2), but all who have offended you must be forgiven; (b) the offender does not have to ask pardon *first* (as in examples in Billerbeck I 425).¹ As was pointed out as long ago as 1911 by the Jewish author Gerald Friedlander, there are some remarkable passages elsewhere that give the lie to such broad assertions.² While acknowledging the thorny problem of the dating and origin of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*,³ it at least shows the need for greater caution in making statements like Fr. Gächter's, since neither of the above contentions holds true in the face of the magnificent pericope in the Testament of Gad, 6:1-4: 'If a man sin against thee, cast forth the poison of hate and speak peaceably to him, and in thy soul hold not guile; and if he confess and repent, forgive him. But if he deny it, do not be angry with him . . . but if he be shameless and persistent in his wrong-doing, even so forgive him from the heart and leave to God the judgment.'⁴ It is true that Christ's words stand in open contrast with the *practice* of many of the Pharisees of his day, but this hardly justifies writing off the whole of Judaism and Jewish teachings. Bultmann would seem to be on more solid ground when he observes that what is new and specifically Christian is the awareness of his followers of having received God's forgiveness through their sharing in the Christ-Event, thus being enabled to confer readily their own forgiveness on others.⁵

(4) concerning the *relation* between divine and human forgiveness. The words of Bultmann bring up once more the problem mentioned earlier; we saw that little can be determined on the basis of the *hos kai* of Matthew or the *kai gar* of Luke. What then is the relation between God's forgiveness of us, for which we pray, and our forgiveness of

¹ Paul Gächter SJ, *Das Matthäus Evangelium*, Innsbruck 1963, 218f.

² Gerald Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount*, London 1911, 157.

³ cf. the summary of recent studies in D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, London 1964, 55-7 + bibliog. 421f.

⁴ For the Greek, cf. R. H. Charles, *Greek Versions* . . . 166f.; for English, cf. R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha* . . . II, 341f. cf. also Testament of Zebulon, 8:3, 'Have therefore compassion in your hearts, my children, because even as a man doeth to his neighbour, even so also will the Lord do to him' (Charles, *Greek*, 126; English, II, 330).

⁵ Bultmann, *loc. cit.*, 508f.

others, which we profess? It is commonly agreed that the relation is not one of the following:

(a) it is not a *quantitative* relation, a request for the measure or degree of forgiveness from God which we impart to men.¹

(b) it is not a *causal* relation, our forgiveness of others being the reason for God's forgiving us.²

(c) it is not a *contractual* relation, a *do ut des* agreement between man and God.³

The commonest ways of describing what the relation really is, are as follows:

(a) it is a *conditio sine qua non*, so that our failure to forgive others hinders God from His design of forgiving us.⁴

(b) it is the *criterion*,⁵ the *touchstone*,⁶ by which our sincerity in prayer can best be judged, safeguarding against illusion. In the words of J. Jeremias, 'This is a reminder for him who asks God's forgiveness that he must himself be ready to forgive. This willingness is the outstretched hand, by which we grasp God's forgiveness.'⁷ We profess readiness to return God's mercy on us to our fellow-men.

This then is the basic interpretation of the fifth petition; it is a humble plea to God for forgiveness of our sins, coupled with a reminder to ourselves that such a prayer is vain unless we are ready to confer our own forgiveness on others. As Kirchgässner remarks, the best possible exegesis of this verse is the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35.⁸ The social nature of Christianity is thus strongly accentuated. It shows that man's relation to God is never a simple line but always at least a triangle including one's neighbour. Man 'appears before God linked up with his neighbours

¹ Alfred Plummer, *An exeget. Comm. on Gospel acc. to St. Matt.*, London 1909, 101f., "As" must not be pressed to mean that the fulness of God's forgiveness is to be measured by the extent to which we forgive our fellow-man.'

² Gächter, *op. cit.*, 218f. On the other hand, it seems that the early Syriac tradition understood the petition in the opposite sense, i.e. as a *final* clause ('so that we also may forgive'), making God's forgiveness of us the cause of our forgiveness of others. cf. Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical & Exeg. Comm. on Gospel of Matt.* (ICC), Edinburgh 1907, 2d ed., 60. cf. also Lohmeyer, 128.

³ T. W. Manson, 'The Lord's Prayer', *Bull. of J. Rylands Libr.* 38 (1955-6), 109, 'It is not a matter of bargain or contract or transaction. If you refuse to forgive, it is an indication that you are unfit to receive forgiveness, unable to accept it. If you can't give it, you can't begin to receive it.' cf. also Van den Bussche, 125.

⁴ W. Grundmann, *Sim* (Bible Key-words from Kittel's TWzNT), tr. by J. R. Coates, London 1951, 69f. Also Gächter, 218, Van den Bussche, and Wm. C. Morro, 'Forgiveness', *Intl. Standard Bible Dict.* II, 1133.

⁵ Ernst Stauffer, *Die Theologie des NT*, Stuttgart 1941, 158, et al.

⁶ Henri Lutteroth, *Essai d'Interp. de quelques parties de l'Évangile selon S. Matthieu*, Paris, 2e Partie 1864, 122.

⁷ Jeremias, *op. cit.*, 146.

⁸ Alfons Kirchgässner, *Erlösung und Sünde im NT*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1950, 177.

in countless ways. Any effective forgiveness must penetrate this barbed-wire entanglement of human estrangements and wrongs. And if it is to do so there must be wire-cutting on man's side as well as God's.¹

II. SYNOPTIC COMPARISON

After our examination of the individual verse, Matthew 6:12, it is now time to broaden our study so as to set this verse in perspective. This should help us to discern the place that forgiveness holds in the theology of Matthew, and this in turn may introduce us to a special trait of that theology.

(a) The place of forgiveness in Matthew.

It may be well to begin with a glimpse over the whole of the New Testament. It has been said that 'it is so far the essence of Christ's teaching that in popular language "a Christian spirit" is not inappropriately understood to be synonymous with a forgiving disposition'.² Yet, a cursory survey of the New Testament might not seem to bear this out. As Vincent Taylor has observed, 'There are no references at all to forgiveness . . . in Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and only a single reference in the Fourth Gospel (20:23)'.³ Furthermore, a study of the words for forgiveness in the other Epistles and the Acts reveals that it is almost exclusively *divine* forgiveness of man that is spoken of, whereas what we are especially interested in here is *human* forgiveness, fraternal forgiveness, as seen in the latter half of the fifth petition. It is only in the sayings of Jesus that greater prominence is given to this mutual forgiveness among men. Naturally Christ also says much about divine forgiveness, but in these logia it is precisely 'the presence of the forgiving spirit as a condition of the divine forgiveness (that) is a note distinctive of the teaching of Jesus'.⁴

To see more clearly just what weight Matthew gives to this quality of forgiving one's fellow-man, we must return to the fifth petition for a closer look. 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors' (Matt. 6:12). From a stylistic viewpoint, all is in order. In rendering the Prayer into Galilean Aramaic, C. F. Burney finds that it easily falls into two brief stanzas of three lines each, with four rhythmic beats per line.⁵ His rendering of verse 12 fits naturally into that rhythm.

¹ T. W. Manson, *loc. cit.*, 443.

² W. C. Morro, *op. cit.*, 1133.

³ Vincent Taylor, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 2d ed., London 1946, 8.

⁴ *ibid.*, 15.

⁵ Burney, *op. cit.*, 112f. Verse 12 runs, *usebok lan hoben, heke disbaknan lehayyaben*. It is slightly different in both Dalman, 335, and Kuhn, 33.

None the less, if there is nothing out of harmony stylistically, there is one striking feature with regard to comparative content: that God's dealings with the one praying, and the dealings of the one praying with those indebted to him, are brought into *relation* with one another has no parallel in any of the other petitions.¹ So while the form of the petition conforms with the general style of the Prayer, the content does not, in so far as it invokes this unparalleled 'triangular' relationship mentioned earlier: God—the one praying—his debtors. This certainly suggests that the latter part is of basic importance for the fulfilment of the former part, the petition itself.

Nor is this all. The Prayer goes on to add the sixth and seventh petitions in verse 13: 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one', thus concluding the Prayer. Then immediately changing from second person singular to plural, addressing his disciples, Christ goes on to say: 'For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by your Father' (Matt. 6:14-15). This is truly noteworthy on a number of counts:

(1) The condition, already posited in unparalleled manner in the text of the fifth petition, is here singled out for *double* repetition, once in positive, then again in exactly parallel negative form, so that it is hard to imagine how it could possibly have been more powerfully emphasised. All the techniques of stress are merged into this single statement: repetition, ultimate-position, parallelism and positive-negative formulation, resulting in fourfold reiteration of the key verb *forgive*.

(2) Just as the fifth petition is itself the only one to which a condition is attached, so also it is *the only one* singled out for reinforcement immediately after the Prayer, thus making it doubly unique, the object of unusual importance.

(3) This is done *in spite of*, rather than because of, the *structure* of the chapter. The subject under consideration is not forgiveness but prayer.² This is all the more impressive in the light of Matthew's usual concern for logical procedure.³ His systematic approach leads him to group his material methodically, setting aside chronological

¹ Wilhelm Michaelis, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, Zürich 1948, Teil I, 324f.

² Matt. 6:1 states the general principle, 'Be careful not to make a show of your religion before men', and then it is applied consecutively to almsgiving (vv. 2-4), prayer (5-8) and fasting (16-18). The Lord's Prayer is inserted between the 2nd and 3rd as illustration of model Christian prayer (9-13), and this is itself expanded by our verses (14f.) not, as expected, directly on prayer, but on forgiveness.

³ cf., e.g., Xavier Léon-Dufour SJ, *Les Évangiles et l'Histoire de Jésus*, Paris 1963, 161, 'Un heureux procédé didactique consiste à grouper les sujets; Matthieu est passé maître en cet art de la compilation.'

and other considerations in the interests of orderly arrangement. Thus we might reasonably have expected him at 6:14 to gather other sayings of Christ regarding prayer as such, of which he certainly has several, e.g. 7:7-11. But no, it is forgiveness that is singled out for this position of emphasis. Indeed, the mentality reflected seems to see so close a relationship between prayer and fraternal forgiveness as to make them virtually identical.¹

(4) The passage itself (Matt. 6:14f.) is in this significant position apparently as the direct result of Matthew's editorial work. It seems to have been fashioned from Mark 11:25, 'And when you stand praying, if you have a grievance against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you the wrongs you have done'.² In the passage that generally parallels Mark 11:20-5, Matthew (21:20-2) has omitted this saying. Apparently he preferred to bring it forward to its present position in 6:14f. and expand it into its dual form of positive and negative statement. In doing so, he has achieved two effects pleasing to his sense of order: (a) the later passage (21:20-2) is *simplified*, making the central teaching of the pericope, the need for 'faith' in prayer, stand out more clearly than in Mark; (b) the earlier passage (6:14-15) thus strongly *reinforces* what he wants reinforced in the Lord's Prayer, the need for fraternal forgiveness.

In summary, then, what gives outstanding emphasis to the need for fraternal forgiveness in this passage of Matthew is not only the unparalleled correlation of divine and human forgiveness in the petition itself, but the fact that Matthew comes back to it as soon as the Prayer is finished, stating it forcefully in double formulation, positive and negative, even though it was not the final petition.

Is this entirely Matthew's emphasis, or might it not derive from Christ? A comparison with Luke may cast some light here. Luke's version of the Pater (11:2-4) is considerably shorter than Matthew's, lacking the phrases 'who art in heaven', 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', 'but deliver us from evil', and otherwise differing in some minor details.³ As a result it is characterised by conciseness and brevity, stripped to the essentials, seizing directly upon the heart of true prayer.⁴ And yet, the petition concerning forgiveness is just as

¹ Stauffer, *op. cit.*, 158.

² cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, tr. by John Marsh, New York 1963, 132*, '... one may suppose that Matt. 6:14f. has been fashioned from the version in Mark to serve as a commentary on the petition in the Lord's Prayer for the forgiveness of sins. Mark is itself legal in style.'

³ cf. Lohmeyer, *op. cit.*, 174-92 (XI. Die Lukanischen Formen des Vater-Unsers).

⁴ While being of the opinion that Luke's is the more 'original' version, i.e. less influenced by liturgical expansions, etc., I do not intend to go into the question. cf. Jeremias, *loc. cit.*, Lohmeyer, etc.

full-blown as in Matthew, ' And forgive us our sins, for we too forgive all our debtors '. Consequently, because of its conspicuous *length* in the midst of Luke's marked brevity, an emphasis is achieved which is quite as noteworthy as that which Matthew achieved by adding 6:14f. The difference would seem to be that Luke's emphasis is more spontaneous, not the result of any personal editorial work as in Matthew, but already present in the Prayer as received by Luke. This certainly suggests that the emphasis on fraternal forgiveness as an indispensable condition of fruitful prayer derives from Christ's own teaching and preaching; hence Matthew, by appending 6:14f., simply recaptures the original emphasis that was somewhat submerged in his more amplified version of the Pater.

Some support for such a contention might also be drawn from a complementary argument to the one expressed above about the relation between Mark 11:25 and Matthew's elimination of it from his parallel. As was seen, this verse comes as something of a surprise after 11:20-4 about the withering of the fig-tree and its lesson of faith-in-prayer. The perspective is suddenly changed to include another requisite disposition in prayer, but not one directly between man and God (as faith), but between man and man (fraternal forgiveness), an aspect that is hardly suggested by anything in the fig-tree incident. A plausible explanation for its presence here could be that Christ's insistence on this disposition was so well known and prominent in his teaching that it could not be allowed to go unmentioned.

It is thus more than likely that the prominence and emphasis given to the disposition of fraternal forgiveness as a prerequisite of fruitful Christian prayer has its ultimate origin in Christ's own insistence on it. This conclusion is warranted in different ways by all three Synoptic Gospels, as we have seen. But, unlike Mark and Luke, it is Matthew who seems to go about safeguarding this element of Christ's teaching by following a *conscious editorial policy* of emphasising it, rather than simply allowing it to shine forth from the traditional sources at his disposal.

(b) The *Special Trait* of Matthew's Theology Thus Exemplified.

If Matthew has thus worked consciously to underline this characteristic teaching of Christ, does he do so as a result of a more fundamental outlook? Is it typical of him, revealing a particular theology that can be verified elsewhere? To try to answer such questions requires a closer look at some related passages.

(1) 5:7, 9. Early in the Sermon on the Mount, in the ' charter of the Kingdom ', the Beatitudes, Matthew's concern for *fraternal relations* is already evident. Two of the three beatitudes found in Matthew

that are not in Luke concern such relations: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (5:7), and 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God' (5:9). Since, in all likelihood, these too are present here as a result of Matthew's editorial work, it is clearly indicative of a tendency, an interest of Matthew's.¹ He is the Christian catechist, anxious to show the moral demands of the Gospel, the concrete line of conduct required by Christ of his followers.² The former (5:7) especially could be called a *leitmotiv* which turns up regularly throughout the rest of the Gospel.³ The idea that we will be treated (by God) as we treat others is unquestionably central to Christ's teaching, but it is still true that Matthew tends to accentuate it even more than the other Synoptics, consistently presenting it as the perennial criterion of all Christian social morality.

(2) 5:20-25. Between the principle of mercy stated in the fifth Beatitude (5:7) and its application in the fifth petition of the Pater (6:12) to those who have offended us, Matthew deals with the theme more than once. In 5:20, when Christ is relating the New Law to the Old, and threatens that 'unless your justice exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom', the first example invoked is significantly one regarding the *neighbour*: 'You have heard . . . "thou shalt not kill" . . . but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment' (5:21). Disruption of fraternal harmony by anger is thus the first instance of insufficient 'justice' as presented in Matthew. The very mention of the word 'brother' leads on to the next logion: 'If thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother has anything against thee . . . go first to be reconciled to thy brother . . .' (5:23f.). This saying, which, as Bultmann observes, seems thus to be placed in an alien setting,⁴ none the less serves Matthew's purpose admirably. Despite its ties with Mark 11:25, the situation in Matthew is actually the opposite: it is not a question of forgiving your brother what *you have against him*, but of seeking reconciliation in what *he has against you*, agreeing to remove the grounds of his legitimate com-

¹ The fullest treatment of this question is that of Jacques Dupont OSB, *Les Béatitudes*, Bruges 1954. The first part, the literary problem, has been entirely redone and published in 1958; the second part, the doctrinal message, is in the course of revision but not out yet. We will indicate which is referred to subsequently by adding the date.

² cf. Krister Stendahl, *The School of St Matthew and its use of the OT*, Uppsala 1954. Also Léon-Dufour, *op. cit.*, 163, 'La présentation de la doctrine de Jésus est conçue . . . en fonction des besoins de l'Eglise de Matthieu'.

³ cf. Dupont (1954), 282, 'Tout un ensemble de textes orchestre la cinquième béatitude, surtout chez Matthieu'.

⁴ Bultmann, *History* . . . , 148. There seems to be some inconsistency, however, it seems to me, when he first makes Matt. 6:14f. depend on Mark 11:25 then makes Mark 11:25 depend on Matt. 5:23 (cf. p. 132).

plaints. Thus it does not matter who is angry, I at him or he at me, in either case the goal is always fraternal harmony at all costs, essential for full 'justice'.

But the most revealing feature of Matthew's special interests and theology comes to the fore in the closing verses, 25-6.¹ The parallel in Luke (12:58f.) appears in an entirely different context where it has quite a different meaning. Throughout chapter 12 Luke is concerned to convey a *sense of urgency*: the end-time is at hand, calling for detachment from the goods of this earth (13-34), alert watching (35-40), fidelity so as to be ready to give an account of oneself at any moment (41-8). The Christ is on hand to divide men (49-53), the hour is indeed grave (54-6). Anyone with common sense will put his affairs in order quickly. It is in this context that 58-9 is introduced as a brief parable in illustration of the theme: 'while you are going with your opponent to court, make an effort to settle with him while you are on the way . . .' Take advantage of your last chance; in a few moments you will be at the tribunal and it will be too late. The application is not made explicitly because it is obvious enough: Do the same with God . . . repent now, for you are on the threshold of judgment by God!²

In Matthew, as we have seen, the context is far different. Christ is spelling out the implications of the Fifth Commandment when lived with full 'justice'. Not only murder but anger too must be avoided (21-2); in fact, the effort must be made to settle grievances your brother has against you (23-4). It is at this point that Luke's parable is brought in as a concrete illustration. The tone is strikingly different; the accent is off the urgency of the hour and on the need for fraternal harmony. It is, in fact, no longer a parable in Matthew. There is no comparison being made, it is simply a description of the line of conduct to be followed. The focus is not on 'last-chance' eschatology, but on 'first-principle' Christian morality, perennially valid, as much today as twenty centuries ago. One variation in vocabulary serves to bring out Matthew's twist all the more: Luke's whole interest is in speedy action—he uses a latinism, so the Vulgate text can serve to show us his meaning: 'da operam liberari ab illo' = 'take pains to be quit of him', to get rid of him, so as to avoid fatal entanglements at such a crucial hour. 'How is it that you do not judge this time?' are the preceding words (12:56). This is the only aspect in Luke; there is no hint of any personal consideration, i.e., *who* this opponent might be. No matter, get rid of him at any cost. Get loose! (*ap-*

¹ cf. Dupont (1958), 103-7.

² Besides Dupont's treatment, cf. also Charles H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed., New York 1961, 105-8.

allasso). But in Matthew this key-verb is different: *Isihi eunoon* = (Vg) 'Esto consentiens', 'Come to terms', literally 'Be benevolent, well disposed',¹ 'make up!'. This throws the accent completely off 'non-entanglement' and on to the personal relationship, calling for *reconciliation* rather than mere *release*. Matthew thus brings it perfectly into line with his purpose in the context, and reveals his catechetical concern in doing so, stressing the need for peace and concord within the community of believers. This is even further shown by the fact that Luke's urgent call for conversion in the face of the great threatening calamity is addressed to the crowds (12:54), whereas Matthew's appeal for reconciliation and harmony is addressed, as the whole sermon on the mount, to the disciples of Christ.²

This instance shows Matthew's inclination to give special accentuation to the moral aspect of Christ's teaching as a result of his catechetical preoccupation. And within the realm of morality, his concentration is ever on fraternal harmony. With this fact well established, our next passage is all the more interesting, for Dom Dupont has made a careful study of it that has an obvious bearing on our topic.³

(3) 5:48. 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' What makes this verse so interesting is that Luke 6:36 parallels it with 'Be merciful as your Father is merciful'. At first it seems that in this case Luke is the one with the accent on fraternal relations, but further analysis is revealing. Perfection is never attributed to God in the Old Testament or Jewish tradition; it is rather what man is called to become, and to attribute it to God is, in a way, an anthropomorphism. Once again it is apparently Matthew who has been at work here, and he has chosen this word because his accent is all on the first part, 'Be perfect'; to maintain the idea of *imitatio Dei* as seen in Luke's version, Matthew ascribes to God the perfection which he wants to see among Christians. In Luke, on the other hand, the first part is only a simple consequence: to be merciful is God's own way of acting . . . so you are called to do the same. The two Evangelists follow inverse procedures; Matthew is more the moralist, the catechist interested in inculcating a way of life for Christians, so all his emphasis lies on man's conduct. *Luke* is more the theologian, *theocentric* in his thinking, ascending thus to consider God Himself as the model, drawing from

¹ For another NT use of the same root, cf. Eph. 6:7 where it is translated 'with good will' (R.S.V.), 'cheerful' (NEB), 'with all one's heart' (Knox).

² Although I find the article radically unacceptable, see some of the observations of J. Spencer Kennard Jr., 'The Reconciliation Tendenz in Matthew', *Anglican Theolog. Review* 28 (1946), 159-63.

³ Jacques Dupont OSB, "'Soyez Parfaits'" (Mt. 5:48), "'Soyez Miséricordieux'" (Lc. 6:36), *Sacra Pagina*, Paris 1959, II, 150-62.

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

divine activity the norms for human action. In this precise trait Luke would seem to be closer to the outlook of Jesus himself.¹ Matthew puts man in the centre of his perspective, he is 'anthropocentric', sketching religious man, man as God wants him to be—perfect. In doing so, he precludes all ambiguity; Christian conduct is spelled out in clear, demanding terms. The pedagogical soundness is a distinct advantage, but perhaps at a slight risk that this accent on the moral, the deed to be done, may not always make one mindful of the ultimate reasons for Christian conduct. Thus Luke valuably complements Matthew by more precisely showing the theological basis of Christian morality, thereby preserving more fully Christ's typical manner of conceiving things with the vision of God as the point of departure. God is merciful . . . you be merciful.

CONCLUSION

This difference in outlook between Matthew and Luke, so well delineated by Dom Dupont, seems to hold for Matt. 6:12 as well. As seen, he accents the fifth petition of the Pater by returning to the subject immediately after finishing the prayer. The connection of 6:14f. is all the closer due to his use of the conjunction 'gar'. Then, unlike the order in the prayer itself, now that the disciples are being addressed once more, the condition of human forgiveness is here placed first: 'If you forgive men . . . your Father will forgive you; if you do not forgive men, your Father will not forgive you'. This 'literary primacy', placing man first, is indicative of the very trait discerned by Dupont. The accent is on human conduct, the practical code of ethics demanded of a Christian. In a sense it can be said that in Matthew's perspective God imitates us.² 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.' On the other hand, Luke places after the Pater a parable that stresses, not the need for forgiveness, but the previous petition, 'Give us this day our daily bread'. The 'importunate friend' is peculiar to Luke (11:5-8), and it is a call to confidence in prayer, based upon the assurance of what God's attitude is. Thus once more his accent is theocentric; the starting-point is the nature of God and how He acts, and from this the desired human imitation is proposed as the moral ideal.

In a word, the respective attitudes of Matthew and Luke toward forgiveness are simply instances of a more general characteristic of their individual theologies, the former more *anthropocentric* and hence stressing the *moral need for human* (fraternal) forgiveness, the latter more

¹ *ibid.*, 161.

² Dupont, *art. cit.*, 159.

theocentric and hence stressing the *doctrinal fact of divine forgiveness*.¹ To put it another way, Matthew is the *challenging Gospel of Christian action*, and stresses the need for horizontal forgiveness (man-to-man). Luke, the *joyful Gospel of Christian being*, stresses the fact of vertical forgiveness (God-to-man, salvation). Both are authentic and central teachings of Christ, inter-related by him in his own Prayer, 'Forgive us . . . as we forgive'.

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*THE ARAMAIC TRANSLATIONS:
a newly recognised aid for New Testament study*²

The literatures of many countries have been laid under contribution by students of the NT in their efforts to find the cultural background from which the NT writings sprang. The writings and traditions of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Palestine have all been seen at one time or another to have influenced the NT writings to a greater or lesser degree. The case for Egypt and Babylon never appeared too strong and the view defending their influence on the New Testament did not hold the field for any great length of time. Persia has a better case to offer, but her glory and fascination had faded by NT times. That Greek civilisation should have influenced the NT writers to a fair degree seems evident. After all, Paul was born in the Greek world

¹ Further substantiation of these contentions could be drawn from additional Synoptic material. E.g., Matthew's interest in the fraternal level comes through in his predilection for the quote from Osee 6:6 (quoted in Mt. 9:13 and 12:7), 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' And, of course, the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35), which is present only in Matthew. As if the lesson were not painfully obvious, Matthew spells it out precisely in the closing verse, 'And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts.' Once more, so to speak, God takes the cue from man's action.

As for Luke and his accent on divine forgiveness, this is further evidenced by the fact that only he has the parable of the Father of the Prodigal (as it is more properly called), 15:11-32, and he also is the only one to report the words of the dying Christ, 'Father, forgive them . . .' (23:34).

² A brief survey of targumic studies from the sixteenth century to the present day can be seen in 'Targumic Studies', *CBQ* 28 (1966), 1-19. The article of *CBQ* is the abbreviation of the first chapter of the dissertation, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch. The Early Date of the Palestinian Targum. Arguments from the New Testament*. The thesis is to appear within a few months as vol. 27 of *Analecta Biblica* of the Biblical Institute. For an indication of the contents of the dissertation see 'Novum Testamentum et Targum Palaestinense ad Pentateuchum', *Verbum Domini* 43 (1965), 288-300.