THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS?

AN EMPIRICAL INTERCULTURAL BIBLE READING OF MATTHEW 18.15-35

DION FORSTER

Series Editor
Len Hansen
The (im)possibility of forgiveness?
An empirical intercultural Bible reading of Matthew 18:15-35
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EDITOR’S FOREWORD

According to its website, the Beyers Naudé Centre “focuses on issues in all spheres of society, working in an interdisciplinary way, listening to the voices of both scholarly work and as well as the narratives from so-called grassroots level, adhering to an ecumenical approach, working on an inter-religious basis and drinking in insights of secular voices as well.” These foci are also reflected in the Beyers Naudé Series on Public Theology and this edition, the tenth in the series and written by the current director of the Centre, Dion Forster, does so in an exemplary way.

This publication reflects on forgiveness, a difficult and even a contested issue in contemporary South African society. Indeed, this may be the case in many contexts around the world where there is a history of one group of persons abusing another. Moreover, forgiveness is even more complex when race, economic class and religious conviction are added into the mix. Given such a context, Forster sets out to identify the conditions under which forgiveness could be considered possible. Or stated negatively, what might some of the social, political and religious convictions be that could make forgiveness impossible?

In answering the above question Forster engages the complexity of understandings of forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35 within the context of an intercultural Bible reading process among Black and White South African Christians. He shows that concepts of forgiveness among South African Bible readers are diverse, containing nuanced, even conflicting, expressions and expectations. However, despite this complexity it is suggested that South Africans, and South Africa, could indeed benefit from a rigorous academic engagement with the theologically and culturally diverse understandings of forgiveness that emerge from reading Matthew 18:15-35 in an intercultural Bible reading setting. It is suggested that there are certain conditions under which persons from diverse political histories, cultural identities, racial identities and economic classes, can gain more integral, shared understandings of forgiveness. In this sense, at least, Forster suggests that a possibility for forgiveness may emerge.

As a public theological engagement with the politics of forgiveness in South Africa, this publication fits well in the Beyers Naudé Series on Public Theology. But why is such an interdisciplinary work in Biblical ethics, theological hermeneutics and empirical theology necessary?

First, in the racially, politically and economically divided context of the public of the South African Church, and public of South African society in general, it is helpful to gain academically verifiable insights into how Black (coloured) and White South Africans understand and conceptualise notions and processes of forgiveness. Thus, this book presents the findings of empirical qualitative research in intercultural Biblical hermeneutics. The analysis of the data shows not only what these groups believe, but what informs their beliefs. It is precisely these different theological convictions, which are very different and sometimes even in conflict with one another, that have made some think that forgiveness for the sins of apartheid in South Africa may not be possible.
Second, this book shows that there are certain conditions under which the racial, cultural, political and theological convictions of the two groups can shift from being a hindrance to transformation, to becoming a catalyst for positive change.

Considering the above, this book provides rigorous, textured, and credible theological insight into the complexity of differing understandings of forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35 from the perspectives of so-called ordinary Bible readers of different cultures, who are members of the same Christian denomination - the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Helderberg Circuit.

Three theories informed the research that is presented and discussed in this book. First, Ken Wilber’s All Quadrants All Levels (AQAL) integral theory is used as a philosophical framework that provides language and structure to “plot” the theological understandings of forgiveness in the text, and in the reading of the text by the participants. Second, intergroup contact theory is used to identify the mechanisms and processes for positive intergroup contact that inform the intercultural Bible reading sessions. Third, the Biblical text is engaged in a scholarly exegetical process so as to avoid collapsing the thought world of the text into the contemporary context. This is a critical aspect of a credible engagement with the Biblical text. This process allows for the construction of a hermeneutic bridge to link aspects of the text to aspects of the interpretive insights of the contemporary readers engaged in this study.

As anticipated, the findings of the research process agreed with some aspects of the research hypotheses and varied from others. The findings of the post intervention research data and analysis shows that to a large extent (except for minor variations which are discussed in the text) the participants of the intercultural Bible reading intervention developed more integral understandings of forgiveness. This means that participants were far more open to accepting understandings of forgiveness that were not held within their in-group, but were more common among members of the out-group.

The primary conclusion Forster comes to is that more integral theological understandings of forgiveness are evidenced among the majority participants in this intercultural Bible reading process, which was conducted under the conditions of positive intergroup contact. Moreover, it is shown that one may give credible empirical content to, and explicate, the theological perspectives, and the hermeneutic informants, of readers of the Biblical text. This helps the Helderberg Circuit of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa where the research was done – and may serve as example for similar interventions by other South African Christian denominations – to understand what some of the barriers to shared understandings of forgiveness may be. Moreover, it allows for the design of intercultural Bible reading interventions under the conditions of positive intergroup contact. It may follow that, in other South African contexts, as the data shows that in this case, the participants in such an intervention may became more open to a more integral theological understanding of forgiveness with the “other”.

Finally, this publication makes the following novel contributions to scholarly knowledge and the construction of theory: In New Testament studies the research contributes towards a number of new hermeneutic opportunities that arise from reading the Biblical text from a social identity complexity perspective (informed
THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS?

by Ken Wilber’s integral AQAL theory). Moreover, in relation to intercultural Bible reading, the publication provides new insights into how persons who hold different socially informed views of forgiveness may encounter one another constructively under the conditions of positive intergroup contact. In terms of empirical cultural Biblical hermeneutics the book is the first of its kind to provide insights into how Black and White South African Christians understand the concepts and processes of forgiveness in relation to Matthew 18:15-35. The findings show that there is a logic behind the socially informed theological understandings of forgiveness that are expressed by the participants. This holds value not only for Biblical Studies, but also for Systematic Theology in general, and South African Public Theology in particular. Then, from a methodological point of view, the interdisciplinary nature of the theoretical approach that is employed by Forster will hopefully stimulate new avenues for scholarly theological study in relation to problems in practice.

We want to thank Dion Forster for entrusting this manuscript to us. We are delighted to include it in the Beyers Naudé Series as an example of not only rigorous public theological research, but research done in an interdisciplinary fashion and at a grassroots level as we strive to promote. As always we also want to thank Sun Press, the publisher of the series, for an end product we can be proud of.

Len Hansen
Editor: Beyers Naudé Series on Public Theology
DEDICATION

For my children, Courtney and Liam,
and for a more just future shared with all of South Africa’s children
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by expressing my sincerest gratitude to Prof Jan van der Watt. He has been a senior colleague and guide in my academic career for more than two decades. He has invested time, energy, and funding in my academic and personal development. His passion for the study of the New Testament is inspiring. I am truly grateful for the opportunity that he afforded me to undertake this study. His efforts to secure funding, to spend time with me at Radboud University in Nijmegen, and his encouragement and trust, have been invaluable in the completion of this project. Similarly, I would like to express my thanks to Prof Christiaan Hermans. He introduced me to Practice Oriented research and the value of qualitative empirical theological inquiry. I have learnt so much from him and value his scholarship and friendship immensely. I am also grateful to Dr Len Hansen, the editor for the Beyers Naudé Centre Series on Public Theology, for his guidance, meticulous care, and input in the publication of this book. It is a great honour and privilege to be able to publish this research with SUN Media as part of the aforementioned series. The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, and my colleagues in the Centre, do such important work in the various publics of society. Their commitment to justice, service and scholarship is a great motivation for my own work and research.

Radboud University was extremely generous in their support of this project. Over a period of 3 years I spent a number of months living in the Netherlands, reading in the library, and interacting with students and staff. I am truly grateful for this opportunity. I would also like to thank the African Doctoral Academy at Stellenbosch University for their funding that allowed me to be trained in the use of ATLAS.ti. I am deeply indebted to my colleagues and friends in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University: ‘Uncle’ Howard Ruiters for his listening ear and help with the manuscript. Mrs Wilma Riekert for her encouragement and practical help. Professors Robert Vosloo, Juliana Claassens, Marius Nel, Louis Jonker, Jeremy Punt, Xolile Simon, Ian Nell, Christo Thesnaar and Dirkie Smit, as well as Doctors Charlene van der Walt, Retief Muller, Len Hansen, Nadia Marais, Ntozake Cezula, Frederick Marais, Leon Venter (the Radboud cohort), and colleagues Helgard Pretorius, Cornelia De Milander and Jaco Botha. They each assisted in different ways (patiently listening, offering guidance, expertise, advice, reading and commenting etc.) I am also indebted to Doctor Carike Noeth, Professor Kurt April, Doctor Katherine Train, Neil Kramm, Marthie Momberg, Barnabé Msabah (ATLAST.ti), and Professor Jacobus (Kobus) Kok (social identity complexity theory).

I am also truly grateful to my family; my wife Megan and our children Courtney and Liam (to whom this work is dedicated). Very few spouses are patient and supportive enough to support someone through a PhD project (let alone two!) I am so grateful for the time, patience, advice, and sacrifice that they have put into this project. In truth, they deserve any credit it may warrant upon completion.

Finally, I am grateful to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, and particularly the two participating congregations (Church Street Methodist Church and Coronation
Ave Methodist Church). Their courage to approach this challenging topic, and their witness to finding a way to live in forgiveness, is a gift to the Church and our society. I have learnt so much from this journey with them!

Dion A Forster
Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology
Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology
Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch
CONTENTS

Editor’s Foreword .......................................................... v
Dedication .................................................................. viii
Acknowledgements ......................................................... ix
List of abbreviations and acronyms ..................................... xiii
List of figures and tables ................................................. xiii

1 The (im)possibility of forgiveness? Introduction .................... 1
1.1 Introduction and background to the study .................... 1
1.2 An introduction to the research problem ...................... 3
1.3 Hypothesis and assumptions ................................ 8
1.4 Research objectives ............................................. 9
1.5 Research questions ............................................ 10
1.6 Methodology ..................................................... 10
1.7 The significance of the study ................................ 12
1.8 Limitations of the study ....................................... 14
1.9 Outline of the chapters ..................................... 15
1.10 Relevant terms for this study ................................ 17
1.11 Concluding remarks ....................................... 20

2 Theoretical underpinnings I: An integral (AQAL) theory for complex
individual and social identity mapping of theological understandings
of forgiveness ............................................................... 21
2.1 Introduction ...................................................... 21
2.2 The need for a conceptual framework to plot understandings
of forgiveness ............................................................... 21
2.3 An introduction Ken Wilber’s integral AQAL theory ........... 24
2.4 Holistic identity and the construction of meaning in relation to
Ken Wilber’s four quadrants of reality .......................... 36
2.5 AQAL theory and empirical intercultural Bible reading ..... 54
2.6 Concluding remarks ....................................... 56

3 Theoretical underpinnings II: Intergroup Contact Theory as an
informant for structuring a positive intercultural Bible reading
intervention ............................................................... 57
3.1 Introduction ...................................................... 57
3.2 Intergroup contact theory and the contact hypothesis ........ 58
3.3 Key dimensions of positive intergroup contact ............. 59
3.4 Conceptual framework and terminology .................... 72
3.5 Intergroup contact theory and intercultural Bible reading
on forgiveness ....................................................... 79
3.6 Concluding remarks ....................................... 80
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>An exegetical reading of Matthew 18.15-35: The Biblical text as reflective surface</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Why Matthew 18.15-35?</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 A close reading of the text</td>
<td>87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4 Aspects of the social and historical context of the Matthean community</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.5 On forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.6 On community in the Gospel of Matthew</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.7 Mimesis and reciprocity in the ancient near east and the Gospel of Matthew</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.8 An AQAL reading of the text: Establishing the integral possibility of Matthew 18.15-35 for an intercultural Bible reading on forgiveness</td>
<td>126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.9 Concluding remarks</td>
<td>134</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Research problem and design</td>
<td>137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Revisiting the research problem</td>
<td>138</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3 Hypothesis and research questions</td>
<td>139</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5 The scope of the research and the fields of study</td>
<td>140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.6 Research method</td>
<td>146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.7 The Intervention: topic, social context, designing intervention practices</td>
<td>148</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.8 Design of Analysis</td>
<td>163</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.9 Definitions of codes</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.10 Concluding remarks</td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The findings</td>
<td>177</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>177</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2 First research question</td>
<td>178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.3 Second research question</td>
<td>189</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.4 Third research question</td>
<td>198</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.5 Concluding remarks</td>
<td>210</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Intercultural Biblical hermeneutics on forgiveness: Discussion and conclusions</td>
<td>213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.1 Introduction</td>
<td>213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.2 A discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions</td>
<td>214</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.3 Contributions of this research to theory</td>
<td>219</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.4 Possibilities for future research</td>
<td>223</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.5 Reflection on the research process and findings</td>
<td>224</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.6 Conclusion</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td></td>
<td>227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td></td>
<td>254</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td></td>
<td>256</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td></td>
<td>260</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td></td>
<td>261</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AQAL  All Quadrants All Levels
CAQDAS  Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
IJR  Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
LL  Lower Left
LR  Lower Right
MCSA  Methodist Church of Southern Africa
MSS  Manuscript (the actual form of the Greek word in the text)
NIV  New International Version
NRSV  New Revised Standard Version
RIS  Research Information Services
RTF  Rich Text Format
TRC  Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UBS GNT  United Bible Society Greek New Testament
UL  Upper Left
UR  Upper Right

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

Figure 1: Levels of Evolution .............................................................. 28
Figure 2: Wilber’s primary existential realms ................................... 44
Figure 3: A visual representation of AQAL theory .............................. 45
Figure 4: Wilber’s four domains of validity claims ........................... 50
Figure 5: Upper Left, Lower Right ................................................... 127
Figure 6: Upper Left, Lower Left, Lower Right ............................... 128
Figure 7: All Quadrants ................................................................. 129
Figure 8: Four aspects of social and individual identity and meaning ...... 132
Figure 9: Age distribution of participants ........................................ 158
Figure 10: A diagrammatic overview of the research design and intervention process ........................................ 160

TABLES

Table 1: Interior and Exterior holon correlations ............................. 43
Table 2: A proposed structure for Matthew 18 ................................. 93
Table 3: Translation and exegetical analysis of Matthew 18.15-35 .......... 94
Table 4: Demographic information of participants ............................ 157
Table 5: Calculation of interrater reliability (Cohen’s Kappa) ............... 166
Table 6: AQAL codes ................................................................. 167
1 THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS?

Introduction

1.1 Introduction and background to the study

Forgiving another for wrongdoing is a complex and difficult process. Theological understandings of forgiveness vary a great deal among Christians. This is particularly so when persons hold different understandings of the concept based on their readings of the Biblical text. This research will show that social identity, shaped by notions such as race, culture and theological beliefs, play a significant role in understandings of forgiveness.

Moreover, interpersonal socio-political factors such as the nature of the offence, whether reparation has been made (or attempted), the political identities of the parties involved, expectations and conditions for the self and for the other, also play a role in understandings of forgiveness. This research show that forgiveness engages aspects of personal identity, while at the same time operating within a web of social conditions that form varied hermeneutic perspectives. Within the South African social, political, economic and religious context forgiveness of the other (and even the self) is a contested issue. Some suggest that forgiveness is a necessary condition for moving forward to a better future for all South Africans (Thesnaar, 2008: 53–73, 2014: 1–8; Tutu, 2012: 47–48, 74, 218). Yet, some of the entrenched theological, social, racial, economic and political challenges that South Africa faces seem to suggest that forgiveness is almost impossible. The 2015 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) report found the following:

While most South Africans agree that the creation of a united, reconciled nation remains a worthy objective to pursue, the country remains afflicted by its historical divisions. The majority feels that race relations have either stayed the same or deteriorated since the country’s political transition in 1994 and the bulk of respondents have noted income inequality as a major source of social division. Most believe that it is impossible to achieve a reconciled society for as long as those who were disadvantaged under apartheid remain poor within the ‘new South Africa’ (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2015: 1).

Recent events in South Africa, such as the #Feesmustfall protests against economic inequalities and economic injustice in higher education (Baloyi & Isaacs, 2015), the spate of racial slurs on social media (e.g., Penny Sparrow) (Makhulu, 2016: 260; Nhemachena, 2016: 411–416; Surmon, Juan & Reddy, 2016: 1–2), and the re-racialisation of society through identity politics (Mbembe, 2015), seem to support the IJR’s findings.

South Africa faces significant challenges with regards to dealing with the ‘sins’ of its past and the complexity of our present life. How do persons understand forgiveness