1.
Introduction

For centuries, Christians reciting the Apostles' Creed have affirmed, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins'. While the origins of the Apostles' Creed are shrouded in legend,[1] it is apparent that by the middle of the second century the phrase 'forgiveness of sins' was included in what may well be the earliest summary of the Christian faith alongside the Father, the ruler of the entire world, Jesus Christ our Saviour, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete and the holy church.[2] Thus from its earliest days the church has placed 'the forgiveness of sins' at the centre of its faith. This observation sets the agenda for this study, which analyses the phrase 'the forgiveness of sins', its antecedents in the Jewish Testament and other Jewish writings, the different contexts in which it is found in the New Testament, and the ways in which the phrase is taken up and developed in the writings of the early church until Augustine.

Although the phrase is nowhere found in the Jewish Testament, its predominant use without the definite article governing either noun reflects the grammar of the LXX: Jeremias refers to it as a 'biblical construction'.[3] The phrase may be pre-Christian in origin, as Jeremias suggests, or it may originate from the early Aramaic-

1. In his commentary on an early version of the creed, Rufinus records the tradition that after Pentecost the apostles formulated a brief formulary that would set a common standard for all their future preaching (*Commentary on the Apostles' Creed* 2).
2. *Epistula Apostolorum* 5; cf. C.D.G. Muller, 'Epistula Apostolorum', in *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (ed. W. Schneemelcher; Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991), vol. 1, pp.249-284.
3. J. Jeremias, *Die Sprache des Lukasevangeliums: Redaktion und Tradition am Nicht-Markusstoff des dritten Evangeliums* (Gőttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), pp.18-20. Jeremias argues that the absence of the definite article governing ἄφεσις reflects the Semitic construct state, while the lack of an article governing ἁμαρτιῶν is characteristically Greek. ἄφεσις has the definite article only in Col. 1:14, while ἁμαρτιῶν has the article in Col. 1:14 and Acts 2:38.

speaking Christian congregations; on the other hand, the New Testament writers may simply have adopted or coined a phrase in the Septuagintal style.

While the phrase is Greek, the forgiveness of sins originates in a Jewish context, since in the wider Graeco-Roman world, forgiveness was not perceived as a virtue.[1] Seneca claimed that it is not right out of a weak sense of pity to pardon (*ignoscere*) a crime or misdeed or to remit a punishment that is due. A ruler's decision to show mercy, on the other hand, is governed by reason and follows the most just course of action, acting in accordance with what is fair and good even if this does not comply with the letter of the law: whereas pardon is the remission of punishment that is due, mercy declares that those who are let off did not deserve any different treatment.[2] The Greek term συγγνώμη is not the equivalent of the English term 'forgiveness', though it can be applied to situations where people act either under external compulsion or in excusable ignorance.[3] Nevertheless the normal cultural response to wrongdoing, for those who valued honour, power or status, was to exact revenge: to forgive was a sign of weakness.[4] Thus although the phrase ἄφεσις [τῶν] ἁμαρτιῶν is Greek, there is no doubt that it is an unwieldy translation of a distinctively Jewish concept.[5]

1. Cf. C.L. Griswold and D. Konstan (eds.), *Ancient Forgiveness: Classic, Judaic and Christian* (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), pp.3-133; cf. C.L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).
2. *De clementia* 2.7.1-3; cf. D. Konstan, 'Assuaging Rage: Remorse, Repentance, and Forgiveness in the Classical World', in Griswold and Konstan, *Ancient Forgiveness*, pp.17-30; S.M. Braund, 'The Anger of Tyrants and the Forgiveness of Kings', in Griswold and Konstan, *Ancient Forgiveness*, pp.79-96. According to I.K. Mbabazi, Seneca fails to draw a clear distinction between showing mercy and forgiveness: *The Significance of Interpersonal Forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013), pp.73-85.
3. P. duBois, 'Achilles, Psammenitus and Antigone: Forgiveness in Homer and Beyond', in Griswold and Konstan, *Ancient Forgiveness,* pp.31-47.
4. K. Gutzmiller, 'All in the Family: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the New Comedy', *ibid.*, pp.48-75; K. Milnor, 'Gender and Forgiveness in the Early Roman Empire', in Griswold and Konstan, *Ancient Forgiveness*, pp.97-114. In Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities* 8.50-54, Marcius pardons the city of Rome in response to his mother's plea to do what is just and becoming to both himself and his country (cf. Mbabazi, *Interpersonal Forgiveness*, pp.68-71). This is clearly a decision of which Dionysius approves, yet Marcius recognises that it will also be his undoing as he says to his mother, ἐμὲ δὲ τὸν εὐσεβῆ καὶ φιλόστοργον υἱὸν ἀπολώλεκας (8.54.1): he foresees that yielding to his mother's request to spare the city will result in his subsequent murder (8.57-59).
5. Cf. the soteriological studies of D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967); S. Lyonnet, *Sin,*

The earliest known occurrence of the phrase is Mk. 1:4, which refers to John preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke retains Mark's reference to John baptising 'for the forgiveness of sins' (3:3) and also says of John in Zechariah's prophecy that he would go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give the knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins (1:77). At the end of the gospel, Jesus sends the disciples out to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (24:47). Luke thus uses the phrase three times in his gospel and also uses it a further five times in Acts, where he records the apostles' fulfilment of Jesus' commission:[1] Peter calls on the Pentecost crowd to repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins (2:38) and tells the Council that God has exalted Jesus to his right hand as Lord and Saviour to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins (5:31); in his sermon to Cornelius, he also declares that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name (10:43). Paul takes up the theme at Antioch: the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed through the risen Jesus (13:38); before Agrippa he recalls how the risen Lord commissioned him to open the eyes of the Gentiles, turn them from darkness to light and the power of Satan to God, so that they might receive the forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in him (26:18). While Luke attributes the phrase to Paul, in the Pauline corpus it is only found in Col. 1:14, with its reference to having redemption, the forgiveness of sins, in Christ.

None of these references relates the phrase 'forgiveness of sins' to the death of Jesus. Matthew is the only one to do this explicitly as in his account of the Last Supper he refers to Jesus' blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins (26:28), and the associated phrase 'the forgiveness of trespasses' is associated with redemption through Jesus' blood in Eph. 1:7. Thus, within the New Testament, the link between the death of Jesus and the forgiveness of sins is disconcertingly slender: although Cecil Frances Alexander's hymn proclaims, 'He died that we might be forgiven',[2] it remains the case that the phrase 'the forgiveness

Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970); C.-H. Sung, *Vergebung der Sűnden: Jesu Praxis der Sűndenvergebung nach den Synoptikern und ihre Voraussetzungen im Alten Testament und frühen Judentum* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993); J. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), pp.80-88.

1. The western text of Acts 19:5 includes an extra reference, stating that Paul baptised the Ephesian disciples 'for the forgiveness of sins'.
2. 'There is a green hill far away', published in her *Hymns for Little Children* (Philadelphia: H. Hooker, 1850), in a series of hymns designed to explain the

of sins' is only explicitly tied to the death of Jesus in Matthew's redaction of Mark's account of the Last Supper.

Although the phrase did not originate with Luke, the frequency with which he employs it ensures that the 'forgiveness of sins' is a distinctively Lukan theme in the New Testament. This raises questions because Luke mentions forgiveness more than any other New Testament writer, and he also seems to go out of his way to avoid any interpretation of Christ's death in terms of atoning sacrifice: the ransom saying of Mk. 10:45 is edited out (Lk. 22:26-27), and while Jesus does refer to 'the new covenant in my blood' at the Last Supper, the fact that these words are textually insecure, missing as they are from the western manuscripts (22:19b-20),[1] adds to the impression that Luke avoided interpreting Jesus' death in terms of atonement. The one occasion when Luke definitely uses atonement language with respect to Jesus' death is in Acts 20:28, in which Paul charges the Ephesian elders with caring for the flock of God, ἣν περιεποιήσατο διὰ τοῦ αἵματος ἰδίου. Although this verse is sometimes seized upon as evidence that Luke does have a theology of the atonement after all,[2] Luke here does not reflect on the question of how the blood secured the redemption. The thrust of the verse is paraenetic, as Paul emphasises to the elders the need to take heed to themselves and to the church for which God paid so high a price, namely his own blood, or with the blood of his own, depending how the Greek is read. The value of the church to God is underscored by the cost of redemption he has borne and for this reason the elders need to be extra vigilant in taking care of God's treasured possession. Thus soteriology is subordinated to ecclesiology and paraenesis; Luke does the same thing in a more drastic fashion with the ransom saying from Mark 10:45, where Mark's reference to Jesus giving his life is replaced with a comment on Jesus' adoption of the role of the servant at the meal table as he answers the disciples' dispute about who is the greatest: 'For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves' (Lk. 22:27).

Apostles' Creed: this may well have influenced the theology behind this line of her hymn. This hymn was number 12 in the book, and was associated with creedal line, 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried'. The hymn for the line in the creed, 'the forgiveness of sins' was 'Once in baptismal waters bright'.

1. D it$^{a, d, ff2, i, 1}$
2. E.g. I.H. Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), p.334: 'Although this is one of the few places in Luke's writings which clearly refer to the doctrinal significance of the cross, we should not underestimate its importance as a statement which represented his own belief as well as Paul's.'

For all his emphasis on forgiveness, then, Luke does not appear to interpret Jesus' death in terms of sacrifice. Conzelmann indeed claims that in the gospel there is 'no direct soteriological significance drawn from Jesus' suffering or death'.[1] Likewise, George surveys Luke's extensive references to the passion of Christ, and concludes that Luke never gives the cross any vicarious or expiatory significance and nowhere connects it with the forgiveness of sins: instead, for Luke, salvation depends on the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.[2] Given the traditional Christian association of the forgiveness of sins with the death of Jesus, it is surprising to discover that Luke, the New Testament author who uses this phrase most frequently, appears to avoid making that connection.

There are those who welcome Luke's reluctance to ground the forgiveness of sins in the atoning death of Jesus. This is the perspective of Abelard: 'How cruel and unjust it appears that anyone should have demanded the blood of the innocent as any kind of ransom, or have been in any way delighted with the death of the innocent, let alone that God should have found the death of his Son so acceptable, that through it he should have been reconciled to the whole world.'[3] This point is made forcefully in Robin Collins' parody of the parable of the prodigal son, in which the father refuses to forgive the son until the penalty of his wrongdoing has been paid, which it duly is, by the elder brother, who works himself to death in the fields to pay his brother's debt, after which the younger son and his father are finally reconciled.[4] Yet if God's offer of forgiveness in the gospel is not based on the atoning death of Christ, why was the death of Jesus necessary? Bultmann argues that it was not: sin cannot be compensated for; it can only be forgiven, and the basis for that forgiveness is not the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's forgiveness is a free act and is communicated to us solely through the word of Jesus.[5]

1. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960), p.201.
2. A. George, 'Le Sens de la Mort de Jésus pour Luc', *Revue Biblique* 80 (1973), pp.186-217; cf. G. Voss, *Die Christologie der lukanischen Schriften in Grundzügen* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965), p.130.
3. Abelard, in Migne, *Patrologia*, clxxviii 835; cf. R.S. Franks, *The Atonement: The Dale Lectures for 1933* (London: OUP, 1934), p.158; J. Denny Weaver, *The Non-violent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).
4. R. Collins, 'Understanding Atonement: A New and Orthodox Theory', unpublished manuscript, cited in *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (ed. J.B. Green and M.D. Baker; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), pp.147-148.
5. R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London: Collins, 1958), pp.138-154; cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.17.1.

Bultmann's followers associated Luke-Acts with the rise of early Catholicism:[1] according to this view, the phrase 'forgiveness of sins' may well have been taken over from existing theological tradition without any depth of understanding or exploration of its significance. An alternative possibility is that Luke consciously avoided connecting forgiveness with atonement on the basis that, in the course of Jesus' ministry, the divine forgiveness is freely available to all who repent: what need, then, of an atoning sacrifice to remove sin?[2]

On the other hand, it may be that Luke avoided references to atonement because he saw a correlation between divine and human forgiveness.[3] Such a correlation is suggested by the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer: καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν (11:4). If Luke draws an analogy between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness then that would account for his minimising an interpretation of Jesus' death in terms of sacrificial atonement, since sacrificial atonement has no place in interpersonal forgiveness.[4] This makes the idea of divine forgiveness

1. In *Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. L.E. Keck and J.L. Martyn; London: SPCK, 1968): P. Vielhauer, 'On the "Paulinism" of Acts', pp.33-50; E. Käsemann, 'Ephesians and Acts', pp.288-297; H. Conzelmann, 'Luke's Place in the Development of Early Christianity', pp.298-316.
2. Cf. P. Fiedler, *Jesus und die Sünde* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), pp.277-281.
3. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.444: 'Jesus spins human behavior from the cloth of divine behavior; the embodiment of forgiveness in the practice of Jesus' followers is a manifestation and imitation of God's own character.'
4. Williams attributes this view to Faustus Socinus, *De Iesu Christo Servatore*, iii. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, *Vols 1–2 of Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum Quos Unitarios Vocant*, 8 vols. (Irenopoli: post 1656), vol. 2, pp.115–246: Paulus itidem, ut alibi vidimus, monet nos, ut imitators Dei sumus: et quemadmodum is per Christum peccata nobis condonavit, sic nos invicem condonemus. Quod si Deus ita per Christum nobis peccata condonavit, ut interim ab ipso Christo eorum poenas repetierit, quid vetat, quo minus eos, ex Pauli praescripto, Deum imitate, pro offensis proximi nostri non quidem ab ipso, se dab alio quopiam, ut modo dicebamus, nobis satisfieri curemus? 'As we saw elsewhere, Paul likewise instructs us to be imitators of God: just as he forgave our sins through Christ, so we should forgive each other. But if God so forgave our sins through Christ, that he yet demanded the punishments of them from Christ himself, what prevents us, on the basis of Paul's command, as imitators of God, from seeking satisfaction for ourselves for the offences of our neighbour not from the man himself, but from anyone else, as we were just saying?'(Williams' translation). Williams disputes the validity of assuming a correlation between our forgiveness and God's forgiveness, citing Rom. 12:19 as evidence that God's justice is different from ours because he is God and we are not: G.J. Williams, 'Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms', *JETS* 50 (2007), pp.71–86 (pp.72-73).

more accessible, particularly to modern readers in a non-sacrificial culture: the analogy of human forgiveness can help us understand what it means for God to 'forgive' our sins.

In the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer it is significant that the direct object of 'to forgive' is the offence which is forgiven;[1] the indirect object is the perpetrator of the offence. The analogy of forgiving debts is illuminating:[2] if I forgive a debt, that means I no longer require repayment. Correspondingly, if I forgive a sin, I no longer seek retribution or restitution: if I forgive a sin, I release the sinner from the need to make restitution; I will not demand an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, but will turn the other cheek. There may be good reasons why the person who has committed a crime should serve a prison sentence for what they have done, but my personal desire to see justice done should not be one of them: forgiveness means that I will not press charges.

This is an aspect of forgiveness that is sometimes glossed over, as if the exercise of forgiveness on my part is compatible with the pursuit of justice and redress because forgiving is only about relinquishing any personal feelings of animosity against the perpetrator.[3] Yet if forgiveness does not mean a withholding of punishment, then we have nothing to hope for when God forgives our sins: he can punish us justly by sending us to hell and then 'forgive' us by letting go of any feelings of anger that he might have against us. Those who believe in 'the forgiveness of sins' are hoping for something better than that! Forgiveness entails a

1. This is the case throughout the bible. Despite English translations' use of the passive phrase 'they will be forgiven' in Lev. 4 of the effect of sin offerings, the Hebrew actually states that the sin (subject of the passive verb) will be forgiven them (indirect object): וְנִסְלַח לָהֶם (Lev. 4:20). There are two exceptions to this in the LXX, where the verb 'forgive' has a person as a direct object: Josh. 24:19; Isa. 1:14.
2. The western text of Lk. 11:4 has the reading, 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors' (dative).
3. Cf. H. Heine, *Gedanken und Einfälle* (Hamburg: Tredition Classics, 2012), section 1: 'Ich habe die friedlichste Gesinnung. Meine Wünsche sind: eine bescheidene Hütte, ein Strohdach, aber ein gutes Beet, gutes Essen, Milch und Butter, sehr frisch, vor dem Fenster Blumen, vor der Tür einige schöne Bäume, und wenn der liebe Gott mich ganz glücklich machen will, läßt er mich die Freude erleben, daß an diesen Bäumen etwa sechs bis sieben meiner Feinde aufgehängt werden. Mit gerührtem Herzen werde ich ihnen vor ihrem Tode alle Unbill verzeihen, die sie mir im Leben zugefügt – Ja, man muß seinen Feinden verziehen, aber nicht früher, als bis sie gehenkt worden. Ich bin nicht vindikativ – ich möchte gern meine Feinde lieben; aber ich kann sie nicht lieben, ehe ich mich an ihnen gerächt habe – dann erst öffnet sich ihnen mein Herz. Solange man sich nicht gerächt, bleibt immer eine Bitterkeit im Herzen zurück.'

willingness to see the perpetrator forgo the penalty due to them for what they have done:[1] this is precisely why the Greek word for forgiveness is ἀφίημι, which has the meaning, 'let go, cancel, remit or pardon'.[2]

Thus complete forgiveness[3] may be described as a response to an offence that seeks to (1) relinquish one's own negative emotions triggered by the offence concerned; and (2), where possible, to address what has happened with the perpetrator with a view to seeking reconciliation; (3) to welcome and accept any expression of sincere repentance; and (4) to forgo any demands for personal restitution or punishment.[4]

The greater the crime or sin that has been committed, the harder it is to forgive: some victims of wrongdoing may struggle just to get to the first step of letting go of their feelings and some may be unable to forgive at all. We may even instinctively feel that some atrocities should be beyond forgiveness.[5] If forgiveness entails a relinquishing, a giving up of the demand for the perpetrator to be punished or pay some kind

1. Cf. F.G. Downing, 'Forgivingness? – Of Forgiveness? – Or the Remission of Offences?', in *Making Sense in (and of) the First Christian Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp.62-77; M. Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp.169-171. This means we are not simply at liberty to forgive the person and not what the person has done, as is suggested by R. Holloway, *On Forgiveness* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), pp.36-37.
2. W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.125.
3. For an overview of recent considerations of forgiveness, cf. N. Biggar, 'Forgiveness in the Twentieth Century: A Review of the Literature, 1901-2001', in *Forgiveness and Truth: Explorations in Contemporary Theology* (ed. A. McFadyen and M. Sarot; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), pp.181-217.
4. P.W. Coleman identifies five phases of forgiveness: identifying the hurt, confronting the offender, dialogue, forgiving and letting go of resentment: 'The Process of Forgiveness in Marriage and Family', in *Exploring Forgiveness* (ed. R.D. Enright and J. North; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp.75-94. Cf. R.D. Enright and C.T. Coyle, 'Researching the Process Model of Forgiveness Within Psychological Interventions', in *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research & Theological Perspectives* (ed. E.L. Worthington; Radnor: Templeton Foundation Press, 1998), pp.139-161; R.F. Baumeister, J.J. Exline and K.L. Sommer, 'The Victim Role, Grudge Theory, and Two Dimensions of Forgiveness', *ibid.* pp.79-104; M.G. Affinito, 'Forgiveness in Counseling: Caution, Definition, and Application', in *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy* (ed. S. Lamb and J.G. Murphy; Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp.88-111.
5. The issue is raised acutely by F. Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880: ET London: Penguin, 2003). In Chapter 4, 'Rebellion', Ivan declines an entrance ticket to heaven because he cannot accept that the harmony of heaven will entail a mother forgiving the man who ordered her son to be killed by dogs.

of penalty for the offence, then where is the justice in that? So should there be limits to God's forgiveness? If so, where should the lines be drawn?[1] If not, what right does God have to forgive those who have committed atrocities against others, or even worse, to demand that we forgive others if we want to be forgiven ourselves? Who speaks for the victim in all of this?

It must be stressed that forgiving a sin is in no way to be confused with condoning that sin. An essential part of forgiveness is the recognition that what took place was wrong and should never have happened. For forgiveness to be genuine, an acknowledgement of all the consequences of that sin, including the ensuing pain and trauma, needs to be faced and addressed. Those who genuinely have something to forgive never say, 'It doesn't matter': if it doesn't matter, there is nothing to forgive. What is excusable can be excused and does not need to be forgiven. It is when something is wrong and inexcusable that forgiveness comes into operation.[2] Forgiveness does not mean taking the path of ignoring, excusing or justifying what someone else has done: such techniques of minimising or mitigating the offence may make forgiveness easier, but they should not be confused with forgiveness itself. Forgiveness does not sweep offences under the carpet. Forgiveness brings the wrongdoing out into the open where it can be acknowledged and dealt with. If the guilty party is moved to express repentance in response then the door is opened to a healing reconciliation. Whereas revenge draws the victim across the line to stand with the perpetrator in sinfulness, forgiveness seeks to bring the offender across the line to be reconciled to the victim in grace. As this study unfolds, it will be argued that this indeed is precisely what God in his sovereignty has done for us in Jesus.

This is a study in theology, which is concerned with the God who forgives the sins of the people he has redeemed, and who sends them to be ambassadors of that forgiveness to the rest of the world. It will include a survey of references to the forgiveness of sins from Jewish literature, the New Testament and the writings of the early church. Because of the difficulties of dating the Old Testament material, a chronological approach is set aside in favour of a thematic approach, which allows for valid points to be established in each chapter on the basis of the material presented.

1. Tertullian denies the possibility of forgiveness for the sins of 'homicide, idolatry, betrayal, negation of God, blasphemy, [and] certainly both adultery and fornication' (*De paenitentia* 19.24-26).
2. Although Jesus may appear to be making excuses for his executioners, when he prays, 'Father, forgive them; they know not what they do' (Lk. 23:34a).

The material in the primary sources themselves generates significant questions to be addressed: is forgiveness God's prerogative? In the Hebrew Testament, when priests make atonement, do they do so on behalf of the people before God, or do they act as God's agents in dispensing forgiveness? What is the relationship between sacrifice and prayer in securing forgiveness? On what basis does God answer prayers for the forgiveness of the nation? How can God both forgive sin and punish it to the third and the fourth generation? What is the relationship between the forgiveness of sins and exile?

In Luke's gospel, what is the relationship between Jesus' proclamation of forgiveness and his death, and in what way does Luke associate the death of Jesus with the proclamation of forgiveness in Acts? Is forgiveness impossible without the shedding of blood? Are the Jews responsible for Jesus' death and, if so, are they forgiven for their part in it? Why do we say, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins' when we recite the creed? How did the church's proclamation of forgiveness open the door to the practice of penance and the doctrine of original sin? Is receiving the forgiveness of sins dependent on an orthodox faith? These questions are all explored on the basis of material on the forgiveness of sins drawn from the New Testament and early church writings up to the time of Augustine.

We start in the next chapter, 'God Alone Forgives', with a survey of expressions of divine forgiveness in Jewish literature up to and including the first century CE: we will examine how the verb 'to forgive' is used in the Jewish Testament, the intertestamental literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus and Philo, and observe that God himself overwhelmingly predominates as the subject of these verbs. The prevailing pattern in the Jewish Testament is that wrongs between people must be set right by just compensation: the *lex talionis* applies and once this has been enforced then God is the one who can exercise the divine right to forgive the offender. Forgiveness is thus first and foremost a divine matter, which may help explain the outrage of those who, when they saw Jesus forgiving sins, asked who can forgive sins but God alone.

Chapter 3, 'The Subject of Atonement', explores how in the Torah atonement constitutes the basis on which sins are forgiven and impurity cleansed. As with verbs of forgiveness, God frequently appears as the author of the verb 'to atone' outside the priestly literature, and indeed it is likely that when priests make atonement, they do so as God's representatives. Thus God's readiness to provide ways of making atonement and also to atone for sin himself indicates that the basis for forgiveness ultimately lies in the Lord's own compassion and covenant

faithfulness. It is only in the LXX and other Jewish Hellenistic writings that God begins to be perceived as the object, rather than the subject, of making atonement. As with forgiveness, atonement is primarily a matter of divine sovereignty and this recognition forms the basis on which people appeal to him for the forgiveness of their own sins and the sins of the nation.

Chapter 4, 'Prayer and Sacrifice', explores the tradition of penitential prayer and examines the role played by repentance alongside the offering of sacrifice. The ordering of Old Testament books in the Christian canon easily gives the misleading impression that the early practice of sacrificial atonement for the forgiveness of sins is critiqued and replaced by heartfelt repentance. However, the Hebrew Tanakh closes with the books of Chronicles, which invites us to see that in Second Temple Judaism the norm was that forgiveness was mediated through sacrifice. The offering of sacrifice served to express a genuine, heartfelt repentance, and acceptance of that sacrifice was a sign that the sin had been forgiven.

Chapter 5, 'Interceding for Forgiveness', explores the deeply rooted tradition of praying that God would forgive his people, starting with Moses' prayer for the nation in the aftermath of the golden calf incident. Moses expresses the hope that he might be able to atone for the nation's sin and in the course of the prayer he asks God to take his life if he is not willing to forgive the nation (Ex. 32:32). This can be interpreted in different ways: does Moses offer his life in place of that of the nation? Does he hope to save the nation by refusing to distance himself from them, trusting that God will spare them for his sake because he has found favour in God's sight? Or does he identify himself completely with the nation in their sin and in solidarity with them confess both his and their need of forgiveness? Although all three models of prayer are found in the Jewish scriptures, the third is the most pervasive: intercession means standing as Moses does, in complete solidarity with sinful people, and asking God to 'pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance' (Ex. 34:9).

Chapter 6, 'Exile and the Forgiveness of Sins', focuses God's self-revelation to Moses as the Lord, the God who both forgives iniquity and visits it on the children of the perpetrators to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 34:6-7). God's words to Moses offer no criteria for determining the basis on which he chooses to punish or to forgive: the emphasis falls on his absolute sovereignty. This dialectic in the nature of God is expressed and resolved in exile: the narrative of Kings clearly portrays exile as the outworking of God's principle of inter-generational punishment, yet the narrative itself can be read as a confession of sin

in the hope and expectation that God will respond to his people with forgiveness. The plight of the nation is blamed on the sin of Manasseh, and since Jehoiachin is the fifth generation of Manasseh's family, his reprieve at the end of the narrative offers a ray of hope that, after judgment, God will now respond with forgiveness. Correspondingly the exilic prophets, even as they see the exile as God's judgment, also hold out the promise of future forgiveness alongside as well. Exile thus becomes the crucible in which the punishment to the third and fourth generation is worked out and in which the promises of future forgiveness are forged: in this way exile both expresses and resolves the dialectic of God's identity as this was revealed to Moses and affirms his sovereign right to respond to the sins of his people, either with inter-generational judgment or with divine forgiveness.

According to N.T. Wright, 'the forgiveness of sins' can be equated with the end of exile, and he makes the end of exile the hermeneutical key for interpreting 'the forgiveness of sins' in the New Testament.[1] An examination of the association of the forgiveness of sins with exile in the Old Testament and other Jewish writings suggests that the association is not sufficiently clear to accept his interpretation of the forgiveness of sins in terms of return from exile. There is, however, no denying that the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins by John the Baptist and Jesus took place in the context of Roman domination of Israel, and the influence of this socio-historical context is explored in the following chapter.

Thus Roman occupation is the context in which Jesus exercised his ministry of forgiving sinners: though Israel was not in exile, the nation's subjection to Rome made it natural for people to see this as a sign of God's displeasure. The proposal in Chapter 7, 'Labelling Sinners in Luke', is that 'sinners' were identified in the popular imagination as those responsible for the nation's plight. The chapter uses labelling theory to explore the identification of tax collectors and prostitutes as 'sinners' in Luke's gospel because their associations with the Roman occupying power breached the boundaries of the community of God's people. Those who had the most to gain from this labelling of 'sinners' were the chief priests, who dispensed the forgiveness of sins, but were only able to do so as a result of their own collusion with the Roman authorities. Jesus' forgiveness of sinners and his actions in the Temple challenged the religious leaders, and raised the question as to whether their loyalties lay with God or with Rome. As a result, the Jewish ruling authorities collaborated with Rome to have him executed. At the end of Luke's gospel, the place of the Temple authorities as the real 'sinners' is exposed (24:7).

1. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp.269-71.

Having looked at the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' ministry, we turn in the next chapter to begin to explore the forgiveness of sins and the death of Jesus; whereas Luke, who majors on forgiveness as a theme, does not emphasise the atoning effects of Jesus' death, Hebrews is quite different, claiming as it does that there is 'No forgiveness without bloodshed' (9:22). This chapter explores the association between redemption, forgiveness and Jesus' blood in Eph. 1:7, Col. 1:14, Rom. 3:24-25, and focuses on Mt. 26:28. In the different accounts of the Last Supper in the gospels there is considerable variation on the cup word; however, all agree that Jesus' disciples drank the cup. The implications of drinking wine that has been identified as blood are considered, given the strongly held Jewish ban on blood consumption. The underlying reason why blood can effect atonement is because the life of every living thing is in the blood and all life belongs to God: accordingly, blood is regarded as holy and as such it can be used by God to sanctify what is common, cleanse what is impure and forgive what is sinful. An explanation as to why and how blood effects atonement is offered in Lev. 17:11, which combines two ideas: first, that blood consumption is forbidden because the life is in the blood, and secondly that pouring blood out at the base of the altar can atone for (in the sense of redeeming) people's lives. These two references to life associated with blood are combined using the Jewish hermeneutic of *gazerah shawah* to yield the claim that it is the life in the blood which makes atonement.

Thus the bible's only explanation of how atonement works is an exercise in creativity, and Jesus develops this creative tradition in the words he said over the cup. Reinterpreting the Jewish ban on blood consumption, he makes the point that his lifeblood atones for the lives of the disciples and also evokes the ransom logion in the process. An essentially creative approach to developing metaphorical soteriological interpretations of Jesus' blood is found in the different versions we have of his cup word as well as in the wide range of sacrificial interpretations of his death in the New Testament. From beginning to end, the biblical understanding of the atonement is grounded in the creative use of metaphor.

The textual tradition of Luke's gospel bears witness to scribal editorial creativity when it comes to interpreting and understanding the link between Jesus' death and the message of forgiveness. Chapter 9 explores Lukan soteriology by exploring the basis upon which Jesus commissions his disciples to proclaim the 'forgiveness of sins' at the end of the gospel. In 'Three Layers of Forgiveness in Luke-Acts' it is argued that the correlation in Luke's writings between Jesus' death and God's sovereign

right to forgive varies in accordance with the different textual traditions found in Codices Bezae, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Bezae omits Jesus' declaration that the second cup of wine shared at the Last Supper is the new covenant in his blood, resulting in a gospel where salvation is a matter of imitating Jesus as the Servant of the Lord, in anticipation of the future eschatological reversal heralded by his resurrection and exaltation: it is as the risen Lord that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. Vaticanus includes the cup word, but omits Jesus' prayer for the forgiveness of his executioners: here forgiveness of sins is based on the new covenant. Sinaiticus includes Jesus' prayer from the cross and this raises the profile of Luke's portrait of Jesus as the innocent victim of injustice, and it is on this basis that he commissions his disciples to take the good news of repentance and forgiveness to all nations, starting at Jerusalem, the city responsible for his crucifixion. It is on this basis as well that we can come to a fresh understanding as to why the death of Jesus was necessary for God to forgive our sins: although the shedding of blood may not be a necessary precondition for God to forgive our sins, it can be seen that Jesus taking the place of an innocent victim of injustice places God in the category of those who are the victims of atrocities: there is a sense in which it is only in suffering this kind of violence that God has the moral right to forgive those who have inflicted suffering on their fellow human beings. In Jesus, God becomes a victim of injustice and forgives sin from that position of weakness and vulnerability.

Chapter 10, 'No Longer Dying to Forgive Us', assesses possible reasons for these variant readings and suggests that the cup word may have been omitted from Codex Bezae as a result of docetic influence, while Jesus' prayer for the forgiveness of those responsible for his death may have been omitted from Vaticanus as a result of anti-Judaic sentiment expressed in Christian writings in the second century and beyond, particularly on account of the Jews' apparently permanent exclusion from Jerusalem.

Chapter 11, 'Too Hard to Forgive?' picks up on the theme of anti-Judaism and focuses on New Testament citations of Isa. 6:9-10 in order to explore attitudes towards the forgiveness of sins and the Jews. Whereas Matthew's reference to the blood of the covenant (26:28) has the potential to redeem the gospel from the charge of being anti-Judaic on account of 27:25, Luke does seem open to the charge of supersessionism as a result of applying Isa. 6:9-10 to the Jews at the end of Acts. While Paul holds 'the Jews' responsible for the death of Jesus in 1 Thess. 2:14-26, he holds out the hope that all Israel will be saved in Rom. 9-11, combining Isa. 59:20-21 with Isa. 27:9 to create an allusion to God's sovereign willingness to forgive sin in Ex. 34:7.

Chapter 12, 'The Forgiveness of Sins and Baptism', returns to an examination of the phrase 'the forgiveness of sins' in order to explore why and how this phrase attained such prominence, and takes as its starting point its inclusion as an item of faith in the *Epistula Apostolorum*. This chapter notes that all writers in this period who mention the forgiveness of sins associate this at some point with baptism and suggests that if the forgiveness of sins featured in baptismal preparation or interrogation this would account for the frequency with which the phrase is used. It is suggested that the original association of baptism and forgiveness may be traced back to John the Baptist.

Chapter 13, 'A Baptism of Repentance for the Forgiveness of Sins', explores the link between repentance and forgiveness in Luke-Acts and considers the offer of a second repentance in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. This is opposed by Tertullian, who also opposes a tendency to regard baptism as effecting forgiveness for all pre-baptismal sin without a corresponding attitude of repentance. It is suggested that this tendency could have arisen as a result of a reading of *Hermas* which distinguishes repentance and baptism; this separation of repentance from baptism could have been one of the factors behind the increasing number of parents who brought infants for baptism in the ensuing period. These issues are further explored in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian and Augustine. Augustine's argument that repentance is effective in securing forgiveness for those who have been baptised can yield insights into the relationship between the sovereignty of divine grace and human response if Christian baptism is seen as a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The question of God's sovereignty in forgiving sins leads into Chapter 14, 'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?', which compares and contrasts the pericope of the healing of the paralysed man in the synoptic gospels, suggesting that the different ways the story is narrated reflect distinct emphases in each gospel: christology (Christ's authority to forgive sins) in Mark, soteriology in Luke and ecclesiology (the church's authority to forgive sins) in Matthew. This chapter also takes up the theme of how 'the forgiveness of sins' is used in writings after the New Testament period: thus Tertullian drew on this episode in his attack on Marcion, and both Tertullian and Cyprian engaged with the question over the church's authority to forgive sins. Disconcertingly, both Tertullian and Cyprian stand firmly in succession to the scribes as the definers and defenders of orthodoxy, disputing the right of those who proclaim forgiveness in Jesus' name and denying that such forgiveness comes from God: ironically, it may have been Marcion, who emphasised

the readiness of God to forgive sins, who may have been closest to the spirit of Jesus. The chapter concludes with the observation that *fides qua*, the faith with which one believes, is more important than *fides quae*, the content of the faith that is believed.

We thus end where we began, with forgiveness being the sovereign prerogative of God, who forgives sins, provides the means of atonement and decides how to answer prayer. Yet the sovereign God binds himself in covenant relationship with his people, which can only be sustained if he decides to forgive them. The coming of Jesus to forgive sinners and inaugurate the new covenant is the guarantee of God's willingness to forgive. Repentance and baptism can be seen as the means by which such forgiveness is received, and the church has the authority to forgive sins in Jesus' name. The task assigned to the church is to find fresh and relevant ways of expressing that forgiveness and to ensure that it is always freely and readily available: the decision as to how to define the limits and boundaries of such forgiveness lies with God and God alone.