Rex Mason concluded his investigation of “homily and hermeneutics after the exile” with this reflection:

To realise that this is not a purely academic exercise but a living process, forged in the furnace of life and experience by those charged with the well-being of a community of faith, is to bring all this material much closer to the people of God in every age.¹

This passage joins three themes in Rex Mason’s work: the post-exilic period, the early interpretation of biblical texts, and the importance of understanding the theological dimension of these texts in the modern situation.² The present essay attempts to explore these themes especially in relation to noncanonical literature.³ Rex Mason has long been a respected mentor and has become a dear friend; this essay is offered in his honour.


² The first two themes can be seen in Rex Mason’s oft-cited but (as yet) unpublished Ph.D. thesis as well as his studies in post-exilic prophecy; the latter theme is exemplified in his *Old Testament Pictures of God* (Regent’s Study Guides 2; Oxford and Macon: Regent’s Park College and Smyth & Helwys, 1993).

³ By “noncanonical” or “apocryphal” I mean the Jewish literature of Second Temple Judaism excluded from the the Hebrew Bible.
and in the hope that it will appeal both to his scholarly mind and his pastoral heart.

I

This essay argues that biblical theology, as practised in the Church, must take theological account of nonbiblical literature in order to comprehend the materials within the Christian Bible. The desirability of having an independent biblical theology was not always appreciated in the course of church history. The emergence of biblical theology as an independent discipline is almost universally associated with the name of Johann Philipp Gabler and his inaugural oration on the occasion of his taking a professorship at Altdorf (delivered 30 March 1787 as *De justo discrimine theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae regundisque recte utriusque finibus*). Gabler took as given the starting point that, although all Christians agreed that the Bible was the only source of faith which spoke with a “united voice,” nonetheless there were “fatal discords of ... various sects” (134).

Doubtless this dissension originates in part [1] from the occasional obscurity of the sacred Scriptures themselves; in part [2a] from that depraved custom of reading one’s own opinions and judgments into the Bible, or [2b] from a servile manner of interpreting it. Doubtless dissension arises [3] from the neglected distinction between religion and theology; and finally it arises [4] from an inappropriate combination of the simplicity and ease of biblical theology with the subtlety and difficulty of dogmatic theology. (134-5; numbers added)

Of the causes that Gabler offers here, the first three do not concern him greatly; his main task is to expound the fourth. Biblical theology,

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says Gabler, has all to do with history, and arises from the biblical writers themselves and not from rational philosophy conditioned as it is by its own social and historical setting (137). For this reason, biblical theology is unchanging—unlike the fashionable whims of its dogmatic counterpart—for its content has long been set down. Still, the Bible’s writers also came from different times and places and so their periods must be distinguished, even if all have in common divine authority in their writings (139). History has to be taken into account in order to ascertain the theological positions of the biblical writers. Once these positions are discovered the comparative task begins with a view to establishing what “universal truths” these writers espoused, and so construct a biblical theology “pure and unmixed with foreign things, and we shall at last have ... [a] system for biblical theology...” (142).

The goal of this careful exegesis, and the separation of biblical and dogmatic theology, was, it seems, to bring them together again. Gabler envisaged a method which proceeded from the Bible to dogmatics itself. Despite his programme and protests, Gabler seems to have had some dogmatic baggage in tow himself, especially the Protestant doctrine of salvation to which he refers on at least two occasions (138, 143). This point is especially important for it distinguishes Gabler from what preceded him, and also suggests why—in retrospect—his work was not quite so seminal as has often been urged. Like the proofexting biblical theologies of preceding generations, Gabler’s programme still set out to support the dogmatic enterprise, albeit in a more responsible fashion than his predecessors had done. For this reason, approaches which take Gabler as the patron saint of the severance of dogmatic and biblical theology miss the mark. His historical approach resonates with what developed as

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5 Cf. especially 138 and 142: when the exegetical work has been done, “the question of their dogmatic use may then be profitably established, and the goals of both biblical and dogmatic theology correctly assigned.”


7 Such an understanding is implied by a statement like this one from G. Hasel: “This year [1787, the date of Gabler’s lecture] marks the beginning of Biblical theology’s role as a purely historical discipline, completely independent
the historical-critical method but should be sharply distinguished from it. As Sandys-Wunsch points out in his reflection on Gabler’s oration, “When he says that biblical theology is of historical origin ... what he means is that biblical theology by proper investigation of the documents in the Bible should aim at isolating their purely historical characteristics in order to eliminate them and leave the truth exposed.” Historical approaches to the Bible, especially this century, attempt to treat history seriously, and for its own sake; that is, history is not simply a veneer to be stripped away to reveal the “truth.”

However, Gabler clearly saw that historically orientated “biblical theology” would need to incorporate nonbiblical (i.e. noncanonical) texts. Gabler argued that the historical classification of religious ideas (“what they perceived this occasion of divine inspiration clearly transmitted and what they perceived it finally meant,” 139) would entail the description not only of canonical authors, but for “many reasons we ought also to include the apocryphal books for this same purpose” (140). Gabler offers no examples of what the “many reasons” might include and the suggestion in any case stands in partial tension with his overall approach. On the other hand, the suggestion partially addresses the problem of the relation of the


9 Gabler gives full value to the divine inspiration of biblical writers and this, one assumes, he would not posit of authors of non- or even deutero-canonical works. However, Gabler suggests that even writers of canonical books must be tested: “I would certainly not suggest that a holy man’s own native intelligence and his natural way of knowing things are destroyed altogether by inspiration” (139). Careful exegesis is required to establish “whether all the opinions of the Apostles, of every type and sort altogether, are truly divine, or rather whether some of them, which have no bearing on salvation, were left to their own ingenuity” (143).
The Apocrypha and Biblical Theology

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Old and New Testaments—a theme raised but not resolved by Gabler\textsuperscript{10}—a matter of importance for the discussion below.

Whatever his precise motivation, Gabler’s instincts here were sound. As is well known, canonical works themselves incorporate references to noncanonical texts.\textsuperscript{11} The most famous (and widely cited) example occurs in Jude 14-15 which cites 1 Enoch 1:9. Oepke gives a fairly long list of these, with value judgements about how much weight can be attached to them. The reference to the Egyptian magicians, Jannes and Jambres, in 2 Tim 3:8 is an indication, however, that (1) what has become for us apocryphal was widely known at the time of the New Testament writings, and (2) these very traditions could be appealed to in the context of moral exhortation.\textsuperscript{12} Use of apocryphal works was popular among some fathers.\textsuperscript{13} Such high opinion eventually died down in the Western church, but mention should be made of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs which will be used below. This work is known from early quotations (in, e.g., Origen’s commentary on Joshua), and it was reckoned to be outside the canonical books (both Origen and Jerome).\textsuperscript{14} However, it seems to have been continuously known, unlike many other books which went out of circulation. Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253), for example, made a Latin version based on a Greek manuscript dating to the 10th century. Though admittedly atypical, this case is suggestive of the ways in which traditions lived on in irregular ways.

Beyond the precedence of early Christian practise, there are two main reasons why the noncanonical writings ought to be included in the purview of the (Christian) biblical theologian. First, as James Barr argues, close ties between biblical theology and a history of religions approach

\textsuperscript{10}Cf. Knierim, Task, p. 538.


\textsuperscript{12}On Jannes and Jambres, see now A. Pietersma, The Apocryphon of Jannes and Jambres the Magicians, RGRW 119 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

\textsuperscript{13}Cf. Oepke, TDNT 3:994–95.

effectively blurs canonical edges.\textsuperscript{15} If something about the study of what these writers thought about God, God’s relations with the world, and human responses to that God is of interest to biblical theology, then this comes readily within the realm of history of religion. This task must involve some questions about the practise of religion in the time of the writer, and evidence for this might well come from outside the canonical collection. Thus Barr writes, “My own preference, in thinking about the future of biblical theology, is ... to be less, rather than more, dominated by the biblical canon and its boundaries.”\textsuperscript{16} The refusal to adopt such a stance contributed an odd result to earlier biblical theology, Barr argues elsewhere:

Naturally, as good historical scholars, biblical theologians have taken the intertestamental development into account as essential background; but they have not, on the whole, learned to accord it theological value in any way comparable to that which they accord to the canonical books of either Testament.... And ... though it was one of the main aims of biblical theology in its mid-century development to understand the two Testaments as a unity and to make explicit the links between them, this was commonly done in a strangely abstract, unreal, unhistorical way, as if the Old Testament simply had its own direct theological connections with the New, quite other than the historical links through Jewish interpretation.\textsuperscript{17}

Second, the advent of “canonical criticism” in its several guises has pushed the canon to the foreground of biblical theology.\textsuperscript{18} But somewhat ironically, affirmation of the canon must itself bring approval of tradition,


since it is tradition (or the believing community) which authorizes canon. Brevard Childs’s own interest in the history of interpretation was motivated out of just such concerns. Far from excluding extra-canonical writings from the exercise, this means that not only Augustine, Luther, and Calvin are of interest, but ben Sira, Tobit, and Enoch much more so. How—to cite an example Barr uses—is one to discern the meaning of the title “son of man” without recourse to the Enochic literature? The weight which a canonical approach accords to tradition has the unintended effect of relativizing canonical boundaries. This is certainly true of Childs’s approach; James Sanders, on the other hand, would be happier with such a situation. It is possible that the exclusion of noncanonical literature from theological reflection contributes to the unease shared by some about Childs’s programme.

The post-exilic, noncanonical Jewish literature, then, provides a necessary theological context for a pursuit of Christian biblical theology. It remains to demonstrate how such a claim might work out in practical terms.

II

The examination of interpersonal forgiveness provides a good example, for it moves to the heart of the belief of Christian communities and their use of Scripture. Such an understanding is reflected across all kinds of Christian writing. So, for instance, we read “[Forgiveness] is so far the essence of [Jesus’] teaching that in popular language ‘a Christian spirit’ is not inappropriately understood to be synonymous with a forgiving disposition.” This “disposition” was defined by Francis Schaeffer, once the guru of evangelical Christianity, this way: “We are to have a forgiving spirit even before the other person expresses regret for his wrong. ... We are called upon to have a forgiving spirit without the other


man having made the first step.”22 During the Second World War, C. S. Lewis wrote a piece placing the unsought-after forgiveness of enemies at the heart of the Christian message.23 Similarly, the “forgiveness” petition in the Lord’s Prayer is said to be “the petition, the central one, the kernel of the prayer.”24

Not only is the obligation of interpersonal forgiveness central to traditional Christianity, it is also claimed that both testaments of the Christian canon speak with a united voice on this question. Rudolph Bultmann wrote that the Greek terms for forgiveness refer mostly to God’s forgiveness to humanity which can be received so long as there is a readiness to forgive within the recipient (citing Matt 6:12, 14f.; 18:21–35; Luke 17:3f.; Mark 11:25; aspects of this will claim our attention below). He went on to say that “the [Christian] concept is the same as the OT and Jewish idea of forgiveness.”25 A standard reference work makes the equation between OT and NT even more starkly: “In the teaching of Jesus the meaning of the word ‘forgiveness’ retains its OT content: the removal of barriers between man and God or man and man.”26 What differs, the author goes on, is the contexts to which Jesus relates this forgiveness. Rabbinic categories and words were too confining and Jesus adds the “distinctive” element of the forgiveness of the “brother” (ibid.).

Such statements could be multiplied and they add up to this: forgiveness is central to Christianity; the biblical witness on forgiveness is united; but Jesus develops the concept in a unique way by his actions and his teachings. This last point is worth emphasizing: Jesus is perceived as breaking away from Jewish understandings and (so it would probably be said) lifting the idea of forgiveness to new heights. This is a fair, if oversimplified, description of what would be thought by a majority of

22 From The Church at the End of the 20th Century, p. 145; cited by J. M. Boice, Awakening to God (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979) 104.
23 Mere Christianity (Glasgow: Fount, 1952) 101–106 (written in 1942).
25 R. Bultmann, ἀφίημι, TDNT 1:511.
Christians. There would be no doubt that this normative belief arises from a natural reading of the biblical text.

The earliest preserved Christian writings are those of St. Paul. Given the centrality of inter-personal forgiveness to Christianity it is, perhaps, surprising that the Pauline traditions lack the usual “forgiveness” vocabulary.\(^{27}\) The usual verb (\(\acute{a}φιημι\)) occurs in the sense “to forgive” forty-five times in the NT: thirty-nine of these in Matt-Mark-Luke; two times in John and only once in Paul—and this is a passage quoted from the LXX (Rom 4:7 = LXX Ps 31[32]:1). The nominal form (\(\acute{a}φεσις\)), used fifteen times in the sense of “forgiveness,” is used only twice this way in the Pauline tradition (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14) with the lion’s share again in the synoptics (eight times, with five of these found in Matthew).

All the same, Paul is made to take up the gospel meaning even if it is acknowledged that he eschews the standard “forgiveness” terms. Some suggest that he prefers the term \(χαρίζομαι\) for this job (cf. rsv at 2 Cor 2:7, 10; Eph 4:32), a usage unique to the New Testament (according to Liddell and Scott). More often it is claimed that Paul’s notion of forgiveness is bound up with (even equated with) his doctrine of justification. “Paul rarely uses the term ‘forgiveness,’ but in its place prefers ‘justification.’ They are to his understanding synonymous.”\(^{28}\) So too the theologian H. R. Mackintosh claims that the importance of forgiveness “is indicated by the close tie, if not the identity, between the ideas of forgiveness and ‘justification’. How these ideas, if rightly interpreted, really differ, is hard to see.”\(^{29}\) Vorländer suggests a similar relationship. The terms for “forgiveness” disappear because “the proclamation of forgiveness appears in Paul’s writings as a thought-out and systematized doctrine” and this is expressed in Paul’s doctrine of justification.\(^{30}\) Other understandings of Paul are possible, however, and it seems likely that Luther’s pervasive influence is felt at this point.\(^{31}\) The point here is this: if forgiveness is so central to

\(^{28}\) Morro and Harrison, “Forgiveness,” 342.
\(^{30}\) Vorländer, “Forgiveness,” 702.
Christianity, why must we work so hard to find it discussed by St. Paul whose influence on formative Christianity can hardly be denied?

The situation is different in the synoptic gospels. A “forgiving disposition” is especially associated with the teachings of Jesus himself. One of the best known expressions of this occurs in the Lord’s Prayer. The fifth petition in Matthew’s text runs: “And forgive [ἀφες] us our debts [τὰ ἀφειλήματα], just as we forgive [ἀφήκαμεν] our debtors” (Matt 6:12). The parallel in Luke reads slightly differently: “And forgive us our sins [τὰς ἁμαρτίας], for indeed we are forgiving [ἀφίομεν] all who are indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). The differences between these formulations are well known but they need not detain us here. Despite the different ways they join protasis and apodosis, the same idea results: the petition requests forgiveness to the extent that the pray-ers themselves forgive. God’s ability to forgive depends on human forgiveness. Just in case we have missed it, Matthew goes to the trouble of concluding the prayer with Jesus saying: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15).

There is great resistance to this feature in the text. For most modern interpreters (there are exceptions) nothing must be allowed to impede the free flow of grace from God to his people, even if it means violating the plain sense of Jesus’ teaching on the subject. Thus Robert Guelich writes:

Although one might conclude on the surface that these verses imply one’s earning God’s forgiveness by the act of forgiving others, these verses must be read in the context of Jesus’ teaching about God’s mercy and forgiveness.... Forgiveness of another is not a prerequisite for divine forgiveness, as 6:14-15 might imply.... The bluntness of the Matthean formulation in 6:14-15 does warn his community and us in terms of our ultimate relationship with the Father about the serious consequences of an unforgiving posture.33

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32 See also Did. 8:2 which substantially reproduces the Matthean version. Textual matters are exhaustively discussed by H. D. Betz, The Sermon on the Mount (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

To paraphrase Guelich: these words of Jesus do not mean what they seem to mean, even though they are very serious indeed. Perhaps if this was an isolated saying we might be justified in recasting its sense with Guelich. But since there is much more in this vein—and that equally plain as in Matthew 6—that option is denied to us.

A little earlier in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, the subject of relationships in the community comes up. Jesus teaches that even in the act of offering at the altar, should you recall that anyone might have reason to hold something against you, you are to make reparations before proceeding with the offering (Matt 5:23-24). Here the offending party’s obligations are in view. A similar teaching appears in Mark’s gospel, where Jesus is presented as saying: “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). Here the shoe is on the other foot. This teaching is very much of a piece with that concluding the Lord’s Prayer, except here we see the onus placed on the offended party to freely offer forgiveness so as not to impede divine forgiveness.

Matthew devotes a lengthy passage to the question of relationships in the believing community later in his gospel. Matt 18:23-34 is the compelling parable of the Unmerciful Servant which concludes this teaching section. Jesus tells the story of the servant who owed the king an astoundingly large fortune. When the servant is ordered to sell his family into slavery (which would not begin to cover the debt), the servant implores the king for mercy and the debt is remitted. The servant leaves the presence of the king only to encounter a fellow servant who owed him a paltry sum. Abusing the fellow servant bodily, the “forgiven” servant demands his money. Time is requested to make good the debt, but the request is denied and the minor debtor is thrown in prison. Other servants witness the scene and report it to the king. The king in turn resummons the “forgiven” servant who is reprimanded for his lack of mercy; he is then handed over to the torturers (τοῖς βασανισταῖς) “until he should pay all his debt.” Of course this would never happen, the debt being

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34 So close is the relationship with Matt 6:14–15 that many mss add in Mark 11:26 “But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”
impossibly large. He would live out his days in the company of his tormentors.

As noted, this story comes in the context of Jesus’ teaching on the maintenance of relationships in the community. The immediate context for the parable is Peter’s question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matt 18:21). Jesus’ reply (“I do not say to you seven time, but seventy times seven”, v. 22) indicates that forgiveness knows no numerical limits, and the parable is told to illustrate this notion. Parables are notorious for resisting a clear interpretation and this one is no exception. But it seems that so far as we are able to speak of “the point” of this parable, it lies not with the actions of the king, nor with the actions of the unmerciful servant, but rather with the whole complex of events described. The listener sits in judgement over a complex compound of astonishment, dismay, and distress and is left with the overwhelming impression of the crucial importance of being merciful in order to receive mercy, just as we saw in the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Dan Via’s interesting reading of this parable attempts to avoid this implication: “it is not that our forgiveness of others wins God’s forgiveness for us but rather that his forgiveness confers upon us the capacity to forgive. The one who has really experienced forgiveness will forgive.”

But this is precisely what does not happen in the parable itself. The unmerciful servant, whose grovelling has achieved the desired results, does not proceed to act in a merciful manner. Via seems to sense the discrepancy for he goes on to implicitly address this difficulty.

Yet there are indications within the collection of Matthew 18 that there are other viewpoints represented. Peter’s question about the extent of forgiveness in v. 21 is prompted by the preceding teaching on reconciliation between members of the community (ὁ ἀδελφός σου, v. 15).

The scenario is given of an injured party going to the offending party to

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point out the fault. If this does not gain a favourable response, then the injured party is to return with one or two others so that “every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (v. 16). If this does not work, the offending party is to be ostracized for “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 18). Here, then, it seems forgiveness can be denied: given an unrepentant offender, Jesus positively recommends it. This appears to be in tension with the subsequent counsel to Peter that forgiveness knows no limits.

The final feature to note in this passage is the concluding verse of the parable and the chapter (v. 35): “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” Here we see a similar notion to that of vv. 15-20, namely, forgiveness has its limits and demands and if these are transgressed then there is (literally) hell to pay. Just as the offending party is ostracized from the community in the teaching passage, so too those who fail to exercise mercy will be shunned from God’s presence. Thus, even within a single passage that seems to be deliberately arranged (it is not a random collection), we see different points of view expressed. Perhaps this was the purpose of the gospel writer: by juxtaposing these elements, the community is forced to read each part in light of the other.

To sum up on the New Testament: Christian tradition places forgiveness squarely at the centre of its identity, believing that in doing so it faithfully follows the Bible’s united witness on the subject. And, to be sure, forgiveness is a crucial notion in Jesus’ teaching, albeit much more crucial that many are willing to concede. But even within the gospels we get a sense that there were other viewpoints on forgiveness and its role in community life. This variety is widened when we note that Paul almost never uses the forgiveness language of his Master. If this is the situation with a very limited survey within the NT, how justified are claims that the New Testament “presents basically the same understanding of forgiveness as the Old Testament”? To this question we now turn.

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37 Quanbeck, “Forgiveness,” 319.
As just mentioned, one of the striking things about Jesus’ statements on forgiveness was the pivotal importance placed on interpersonal forgiveness. It comes as something of a surprise, then, to discover that interpersonal forgiveness is virtually absent from the Hebrew Bible. This fact has been noted before, but is not, I think, widely recognized. “Teaching” passages on this are nearly non-existent; narrative depictions are extremely rare. For the latter, there is the scene between the brothers Jacob and Esau (Genesis 32-33) where Jacob, who some years before had swindled his brother in a major way, comes quaking in fear and to plead for forgiveness (which is dramatically granted); after he has risen to power in Egypt, Joseph extends forgiveness to his brothers who sold him into slavery (they also are slavering with fear at the possibility of vengeance from Joseph; Genesis 50); Abigail, wife of Nabal who offends the brigand David, boldly takes steps to turn away David’s wrath (1 Samuel 25); perhaps some of the other scenes from the David stories belong here too (David and Saul; David and Absalom). But there seem to be no more beyond these.

These narratives merit study in their own right, for despite the infrequency of the theme, “forgiveness” on these occasions is seen to be a matter of life and death. All the same, in the OT there is no obligation laid on those who have been wronged to offer forgiveness, nor on the part of those who have caused injury to seek forgiveness. While the occasions are few, the dynamic in each case remains the same. The one holding power has been wronged; this is recognized by both parties; the offending party grovels; reparation is made; life goes on. Morro and Harrison recognize this pattern: “in each instance the one requesting pardon is in a position of subservience, and is petitioning for that to which he has no just or natural right.” Here, the initiative lies squarely on the shoulders of the one seeking forgiveness.

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39 One could add here occasions where forgiveness is sought by one person from another (e.g., Saul and Samuel [1 Samuel 15], or Shimei and David [2 Sam 16:5–14; 19:16–23; 1 Kgs 2:8–9, 36–46]) and this is denied.
40 Morro and Harrison, “Forgiveness,” 341.
of the offending party. This stands in contrast to some of the NT witnesses which place the initiative on the injured party.

That this should be so is all the more noteworthy when it is recalled that very often divine-human relationships are pictured on the analogy of human-human relationships. The dynamic just described resonates strongly with the sort of repentance the prophets call for to enable divine forgiveness. The initiative lies with the erring people; only upon their repentance will God forgive. The implication is occasionally spelled out: forgiveness may be denied. Thus in Isa 22:12–14 Yahweh calls for mourning when the people feast and declares through the prophet, “Surely this iniquity will not be forgiven you (כפר) till you die” (21:14b). The final clause, somewhat ambiguous in this translation (RSV) might be rendered “even until you die” (עד־תמותון). In other words, this offense to Yahweh has no opportunity for forgiveness. Perhaps this note is at its most strident in the preaching of Jeremiah where the rejection by Yahweh of his people seems to be complete: “Then Yahweh said to me, ‘Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!’ ” (Jer 15:1).41

All this is not to say that God in the OT does not desire to forgive, because clearly it is very much the character of this God to act graciously. Many moving passages in the Hebrew Bible describe Yahweh’s willingness and even desire to forgive. Much is predicated on this aspect of his character. So in the prayer at the dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 8 we have the famous petitions sharing the phrase “then hear thou in heaven and forgive (סלח).” This series culminates in the lengthy petition concerning exile. It is worth citing in full, for it illustrates precisely the dynamic already described in human-to-human forgiveness:

“If they sin against thee—for there is no man who does not sin—and thou art angry with them, and dost give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; yet if they lay it to heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent, and make supplication to thee in the land of their captors, saying, ‘We have sinned, and have acted perversely and

41 Moses and Samuel were both prophets who had successfully grovelled before God on behalf of their people: Moses in Exodus 32 and Num 14:13–19 (cf. Deut 9:13–29); Samuel in 1 Sam 7:8–9 (cf. the more complex 1 Samuel 12).
wickedly’; if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to thee toward their land, which thou gavest to their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for thy name; then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause and forgive thy people who have sinned against thee, and all their transgressions which they have committed against thee; and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them....”

(1 Kgs 8:46–50 RSV)

Consistently the initiative comes from the people, the “offending party.” They must recognize their wrong, turn to Yahweh and grovel, and hope that in his will to forgive he hears their prayer and has compassion on them. This is no different than Jacob’s abasement before Esau, or Abigail’s approach to David.

But what kind of forgiveness is this? Forgiveness in the OT seems to mean getting on with life after a breach of normalcy. These more neutral terms suggest another surprising feature of the OT record: “sin” is not the only necessitator of “forgiveness.” For example, Psalm 6—one of the Church’s traditional “penitential” psalms—seems to speak call for forgiveness in its piling up of metaphors: be gracious, heal me, save my life, deliver me. Rather, the breach between deity and worshiper manifests itself, it seems, in illness (cf. Sir 18:21). The psalm concludes, as laments often do, with the conviction that Yahweh has heard this plea. However, the psalmist never gives any hint of “sin”: no terms for it are used; it is neither acknowledged nor confessed. For this reason some have questioned its place among the penitential psalms! On the other hand, the broader and more neutral notion of “reparations of breaches” does fit with the psalmist’s cry, for there is clearly some gap between pray-er and deity. This sense of forgiveness as reconciliation moves away from studies of forgiveness based on lexical items to contextualizing it in the living of life.

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42 This example was drawn to my attention by T. M. Raitt, “What is forgiveness? What is not? The Case for Metaphors,” unpublished paper, SBL Annual Meeting (Anaheim, 1989).
There seems to be, then, a significant structural gap between forgiveness in the Tanak and the NT. Greater variety can yet be found than this brief survey has uncovered. But for our purposes the point has been made. It cannot be claimed that OT and NT have the same notion of forgiveness, based on a reading of these writings in their own right.

Some would still attempt to link the two directly together, and some attention should be given to this possibility. It has been suggested that the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer is related to the LXX of Deut 15:2.43 Fensham suggests this link on the basis of shared key-words: the pair ἀφήσεις ... ὀφείλει in Deuteronomy, paralleled in Matthew by ἀφέω / ἀφήκαμεν - ὀφειλήματα. It must be granted that the lexical items line up quite nicely here, but Fensham disregards the fact the terms have quite different meanings in their respective contexts. Deuteronomy 15 deals with the law of שׂמיטה, the seven-yearly release from debt. Here, then, debt means exactly that, and “release” (שׂמיטה), translated by ἀφίημι in the LXX, does not mean “forgive.” In Matthew, on the other hand, ἀφίημι has the meaning “forgive,” and the “debt” is widely recognized to have the value Luke gives the term: equivalent to “sin.” This superficial parallel does not stand up to scrutiny.

Probably the most promising attempt to forge a link between testaments takes as its starting point the famous law of Lev 19:17-18 which reads: “You shall not hate in your hearts anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love (ואהבת) your neighbour as yourself; I am Yahweh.” These words seem to bring us very close to the New Testament notions we dealt with earlier. On the face of it, the call to give up a grudge and to love one’s neighbour add up to the sort of obligation seen in the obligation to make reparations before sacrifice (Matt 5:23-24). The latter part of this text is taken up in the Gospels as one of the two great commandments (Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28). This would appear promising when looking for a link between Tanak and New Testament on the subject of forgiveness. However, a closer look at the Leviticus legislation in its own context again

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suggests deeper differences. This text (Lev 19:17-18) appears as part of a group of ethical requirements aimed, it appears, at the legal community, or at least at those who are in a position to administer and execute “justice.” The clause “lest you incur guilt yourself” is obscure. The words are plain but their meaning is not. It is noteworthy also that this text is aimed at inner-Israelite relations, dealing with neighbour, kinfolk, and so on (vv. 15-16). In the broader context, the stipulation aims at limiting the part that vengeance plays in the execution of justice. As such, it fits well with the *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye...”) which appears in all three of the great legal codes of the Hebrew Bible (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21). This principle is one which Jesus sought to reinterpret in the Sermon on the Mount: retaliation was not limited; it was abolished (Matt 5:38-42). Thus the gap between Hebrew Bible and New Testament is once again apparent.

V

If one cannot simply leap across this chasm, can one at least find a way to bridge it? In the early Jewish community—around the Maccabean period, or what in Christian parlance is called the “intertestamental period”—the move to authoritative texts was already in full swing. Prophecy had ceased, so rather than looking for new revelation, those writings of antiquity—when God spoke to Israel—were mined for the wisdom they gave to this new community. “Biblical theology” has tended

45 One might argue that “new revelation” came in the guise of pseudepigraphical texts, but even this should usually be understood within the broad framework of “interpretation” suggested here. Cf. the comments of Devorah Dimant:

...unlike most of the writings of other corpora [e.g., DSS, rabbinic midrashim], the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic compositions take up styles and forms of the biblical literature. They may, therefore, be seen as aiming to *recreate* the biblical world, while other literatures, inasmuch as they employ biblical materials, usually aim at interpreting it. But while specific aims and literary forms vary, all post-biblical writings draw upon the biblical tradition and interpret it in various ways.
not to pay attention to this literature (as seen above), but it is here that theological sense can be made of the two testaments despite the fact that the Apocrypha is non- (or deutero)canonical in some Christian traditions. So, for example, in the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, we find: “He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord, and he will firmly establish his sins” (Sir 28:1). So far, this sounds much like the Isaiah and Jeremiah texts cited earlier: forgiveness has limits and can result in an irreparable breach from God. But ben Sira goes on: “Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray” (Sir 28:2). This comes very close to the gospel teaching that divine forgiveness is enabled by human forgiveness, and this from the second century B.C.E.

This section of ben Sira is not broken into clear divisions but moves in a fluid way from one topic to the next. A consideration of anger provides the general context. It is not a simple matter to see where this discussion of forgiveness begins, or where it ends. Skehan and Di Lella see 28:1 concluding a poem on the related themes of malice, wrath, and anger (27:28–28:1), with 28:2 launching the reflection on the duty of forgiveness (28:2–7).\(^{46}\) Snaith, on the other hand, puts the division at 27:30, uniting 28:1–2 in the same poem (27:30–28:7).\(^{47}\) The next few verses of ch. 28 explain how it is that forgiveness of one’s neighbour leads to the forgiveness of one’s own sins. In a series of rhetorical questions ben Sira indicates the estrangement that hostility brings between God and humanity (vv. 3-5): v. 4 (“Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins?”)\(^{48}\) could be the basis for the parable

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\(^{48}\) Cf. *Joseph and Aseneth* where Levi restrains Benjamin from persisting in
of Matt 18:23–35. A double foundation is provided for this teaching. First, mortality should encourage peaceable behaviour—an allusion to a final judgement. Second, such behaviour follows the “commandments”: “do not be angry with your neighbour; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook ignorance” (v. 7). The passage continues by turning to the related theme of how abstaining from strife will lessen sin. These comments breathe the same air as the Levitical legislation discussed above. So in ben Sira we find an interpretative tradition drawing out the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures, and arriving at a teaching which can be found from later times in the gospels.

This suggests a natural trajectory in Judaism itself. As Snaith comments, “this section illustrates well the theological background of all Ben Sira’s practical advice” in its combining of the “traditional Jewish concepts” of “death’ as punishment for sin, … obedience to ‘the command- ments’ of the law and loyalty to ‘the covenant’ which here means faithfully following the law.” Such a combination of themes can be found also in Proverbs 1–9, but ben Sira draws out an implication for those desiring to live pious lives that does not surface in the earlier wisdom book. Elsewhere in ben Sira such notions also occur together. Reflections on death and judgement sharpen the consideration of the divine forgiveness (Sir 5:4–7; 17:25–32; 18:8–14); being mindful of one’s neighbour is a mark of the pious (Sir 10:6–7; 29:1–28 in the context of money lending). But only in 28:1–2

revenge: “...we are men who worship God, and it is not right for a man who worships God to repay evil for evil, or to trample upon a man who has already fallen” (29:3; translation by D. Cook, in Sparks, AOT).


50 Snaith, Ecclesiasticus, 140.

51 Cf. R. Travers Herford on inter-personal forgiveness in rabbinic ethics: “The reason why a man should be forgiving is to be found in the principles ... of the Imitation of God ... and Love of one’s neighbour.” Talmud and Apocrypha: A Comparative Study of the Jewish Ethical Teaching in the Rabbinical and Non-Rabbinical Sources in the Early Centuries (1933; New York: KTAV, 1971) 158. There is much else here of interest that cannot be pursued in this context.
does this combination produce the conclusion that divine judgement can be controlled by human activity, that those who lack of mercy obstruct forgiveness from God when they seek it. These, then, are not just gospel notions; they are the ideas that developed within Jewish thought out of natural currents theological thinking two hundred years before Jesus’ day.

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs contribute significantly to this study. Unfortunately the date for this work is contested and, while Christian interpolation or redaction is a certainty, agreement is lacking as to its precise extent and character. Like the exegetical move made by ben Sira, the “author” of the Testaments exploits a connection between the two great commands of the Hebrew Bible: love of God (Deut 6:4; 10:12) and love of neighbour (Lev 19:17–18; cf. Luke 10:25–27). The Testament of Benjamin links these commands (T. Benj. 3:1–5): exercise of these dual loves protects the pious one in this life and the life to come “for he is helped by the love of the Lord (τῆς τοῦ κυρίου ἀγάπης), which he has towards his neighbour” (T. Benj. 3:5). The same connection provides the pivotal link in the exhortation of Zebulun. Showing mercy—or not—will result in the equivalent treatment by God: “...I appeal to you to keep the Lord’s commands, and to show mercy (ποιεῖν ἔλεος) to your neighbour and be compassionate (εὐσπλαγχνίαν) towards all men.... because as a man treats his neighbour, so also will the Lord treat him” (T. Zeb. 5:1, 3).

Even more pointed than these is the Testament of Gad where we find words which take us into the issues raised in Matthew 18. Gad’s ethical instruction grows out the the biographical material developed in the testament. His hatred of Joseph and his eventual repentance of that hatred

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leads to teaching on overcoming hatred through repentance. So we are told:

Love one another from the heart, therefore, and if anyone sins against you, speak to him in peace. Expel the venom of hatred, and do not harbour deceit in your heart. If anyone confesses and repents, forgive him.... Even if he denies it and acts disgracefully out of a sense of guilt, be quiet and do not become upset. For he who denies will repent and avoid offending you again.... But even if he is devoid of shame and persists in his wickedness, forgive him from the heart and leave vengeance to God. (T. Gad 6:3, 6–7)

These bald directives have no immediate rationale in T. Gad 6, but one need not look far for the reason for practising forgiveness. T. Gad 5 describes the breeding ground of evil that hatred incubates; nurturing hatred leads to estrangement from God. Thus, to seek God’s favour implies showing forebearance towards one’s neighbour. Hollander is in favour of seeing a Jewish origin for this combination, following K. Berger’s suggestion that the Jewish combination of εὐσέβεια καὶ φιλανθρωπία is a response to the Hellenistic notion of εὐσέβεια καὶ δικαιοσύνη. Even if Berger’s precise proposal be faulted, Hollander’s argumentation for the general case that this is an inner-Jewish development is persuasive.54 We find a position here even more moderate (more tolerant) than that found in Matt 18:15-20. There, the opportunity of wielding the weapon of exclusion was a real one, but here this possibility is not even raised, since vengeance is in the hands of God and forgiveness remains the lot of the pious.55


55 A Philonic parallel to the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer is cited by A. Unterman: “If you ask pardon for your sins, do you also forgive those who have trespassed against you? For remission is granted for remission.” “[Forgiveness] in Talmud and Jewish Thought,” Encyclopedia Judaica 6:1435–37, quote from 1437. This text is found in Thomas Mangey’s Φίλωνος τοῦ Ἰουδαίου τὰ εὑρισκόμενα ἀπαντα, Philonis Judaei opera quae reperiri potuerent omnia (2 vols; London: Wm Bowyer, 1742) 2: 670.5. The Greek text runs thus: Συγγνώμην αἰτούμενος ἀμαρτημάτων συγγίνωσκε καὶ αὐτὸς τοῖς εἰς σὲ πλημμελοῦσιν. ὃτι ἀφέσει ἀντιδίδοται ἀφεσις.... Unfortunately, this attractive parallel must be set aside. J. R. Royse has identified the source of this fragment
VI

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

The trajectory through the literature runs this way: in the Hebrew Bible, we see that God is willing—but not bound—to forgive. The same is true on the plane of human affairs. People likewise forgive wrongs done to them by others, but only when the others repent and seek that forgiveness. However, the command to love one’s neighbour, which may at first have had something of the character of the lex talionis about it, comes to be understood more in terms of a divine and universal love and forebearance. And in both early Jewish and nascent Christian communities, this meant that hostility or an unwillingness to forgive impeded the operation of divine forgiveness. This being the case, the need both for the offended party to forgive and for the offending party to seek forgiveness becomes paramount. In the centuries around the turn of the era, both of these have their obligations to the other: one to offer forgiveness, one to

seek it. In other words, there is a complementary movement of repentance and forgiveness.

Much more might be said about the way in which Judaism and Christianity developed this model, each in its own way. But the present task can be drawn to a close. Gabler was right to think that biblical theology was historically orientated, even if he was mistaken in suggesting that the “historical” element could be dispensed with once one arrived at “theology.” Rather, reading the Christian Bible theologically demands an even more insistent historical approach, one that incorporates ancient Jewish and Christian nonbiblical writings in the exploration of biblical theology. By including this literature that lies beyond the bounds of the canon, one is able to discern “a living process” which brings “all this material much closer to the people of God in every age.”\(^{56}\)

\(^{56}\) See note 1.