

Remember their sin no more?
Forgiveness and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

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Trinity College Dublin

Forgiveness and the Question of Interiority in Biblical Tradition

David Lambert (Chapel Hill)

I will examine practices (Yom Kippur, fasting) and beliefs (redemptive expectations) in which forgiveness comes to be seen as dependent on some sort of change in the inner being in later Jewish and Christian traditions and consider whether the biblical texts themselves seem to signify a similar preoccupation with human interiority in connection to forgiveness.

Commitments to Absence and Presence: How Exodus Narrates Forgiveness

Richard S. Briggs (Durham)

Given that ‘forgiveness is a social construct’ (Anthony Bash), it is always worth asking how biblical texts construct notions that we might term ‘forgiveness’. The clearest direct appeal to forgiveness in the book of Exodus is Moses’ intercession in 34:9, in light of the self-revelation of the divine character in 34:6-7. But how the story of the Exodus – and the reconstitution of the people of God en route to the promised land – is told also constructs a framework that can illuminate the nature and practices of forgiveness as they are carried by the book of Exodus. It is suggested that the interplay of absence and presence is key to the book’s vision of forgiveness: for God to forgive Israel is for God to be present with Israel, and interpersonal human forgiveness may be understood as an over-spill of this divine-human dynamic.

The trespass of a servant: finding forgiveness in 1 Sam 25?

David Shepherd (Dublin)

1 Sam 25 has long entranced interpreters with its tale of Nabal’s rebellion, David’s rage and Abigail’s remarkable intervention, seemingly to save her existing husband from being dispatched by her future one. In the speech which sits at the heart of the chapter, Abigail implores David to spare Nabal, but in doing so, she gives every appearance of herself begging David’s forgiveness (1 Sam 25:24-25, 28). In light of this curiosity, this paper offers a fresh examination of 1 Sam 25 with a view to determining whether Abigail’s plea represents little more than a rhetorical flourish (as has been widely assumed in scholarship) or whether in fact, ‘real’ forgiveness may be found in 1 Sam 25 after all.

Forgiven and Unforgiven in the Book of Kings

David Firth (Bristol)

Although forgiveness is an important theme within Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple (1 Kings 8:22-53), it is not an important theme in the rest of the book. Nevertheless, there is an important instance of forgiveness in the story of Naaman which then contrasts

with the punishment of Gehazi (2 Kings 5). This in turn prepares for the statement that Yahweh would not forgive in the case of Manasseh (2 Kings 24:4). This paper offers a narrative reading of Kings to explore why forgiveness is possible for some but not others.

Intercession, Repentance, and God's Forgiveness: A Dialogue between Open Theism and the Book of Jonah

Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (Aberdeen)

The book of Jonah presents God's forgiveness as a result of the Ninevites' repentance. This paper explores the dynamic between human and divine actions as portrayed in the book of Jonah and in the wider Hebrew Bible. In short, to what extent does God adapt his behaviour to that of humanity? This paper argues that our hope of divine forgiveness rests in God's promises to change his plans in response to our own willingness to change ours.

The Wisdom of Forgiveness

David Reimer (Edinburgh)

This paper examines the corpus traditionally defined as the 'wisdom books' of the Hebrew Bible (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) for the resources they offer on 'repairing' broken human relationships. Some recent scholarship has challenged the notion that repentance and forgiveness—key ingredients in reconciliation—are absent, mute, or perhaps, at best, latent in the Hebrew Bible. However, the wisdom tradition has played only a limited part in this work. Yet, with their strong ethical interest, the 'wisdom' books seem like good candidates to find this kind of dynamic even if some of the key vocabulary is in short supply. This investigation intersects with studies on ethics of friendship and dynamics of domestic relationship, both refining the focus relating to 'forgiveness', and broadening the scope of relationships envisaged.

"Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). A True Reading of the OT?

Gordon McConville (Gloucester)

In the teaching of Jesus, the command to forgive the sins of others is seen as a necessary consequence of God's forgiveness of people (Matt 6:12 and parallels). Forgiveness is an important theme in the Gospels. Peter's question, concerning how often he should forgive his 'brother', elicits Jesus' famous response, 'seventy times seven', and is followed by a parable, in which a servant, released from a large debt by his master, responds, not by imitating the generosity shown to him, but by exacting smaller debt from a fellow-servant (Matt. 18:21-35). The parable raises the question whether forgiveness is essentially an action performed by a superior towards an inferior, an act of mercy or compassion in cases where a debt is due. There are counter-indications to this in the Gospels, as in Peter's question concerning his 'brother', implying a transaction among equals. And Jesus' command has a striking antecedent in Sirach 27:30-28:7, in which forgiveness is also apparently among equals, and concerns anger harboured in the heart. The paper asks whether the insights of Sirach and the LORD's prayer represent something new, in comparison with the Old Testament. Observing that cases of forgiveness among equals are rare in the OT, it asks whether forgiveness is the prerogative of God alone (echoing the question in Mark 2:7). The Psalmist's confession, 'Against thee only have I sinned' (Ps 51:6(4)), is a case in point.

Forgiveness in the Christian Scriptures: Sinai, Golgotha, and Beyond

Anthony Bash (Durham)

One of the surprising features about the Hebrew Bible is the relative absence of examples of interpersonal forgiveness. The Hebrew Bible states that God is forgiving, but it is not obvious or easy to identify a theology of interpersonal forgiveness, or to see much evidence of interpersonal forgiveness being practised. This has led the Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt to suggest that Jesus is the “discoverer” of forgiveness. Her claim has been robustly disputed by David Konstan (a classicist) and Charles Griswold (a philosopher). Arendt’s claim is also doubtful because of evidence of interpersonal forgiveness being labelled as a pattern of behaviour in the inter-testamental period. We can trace in the New Testament the development of a theology of forgiveness and show the extent to which that theology is a development of the traditions and theology of the Hebrew Bible.