FORGIVENESS AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: REVISITING THE KEENE THESIS

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Abstract

In a small number of publications, Frederick ('Fred') W. Keene has proposed a new understanding of how forgiveness works in the New Testament; his work is currently being received in both New Testament studies and related disciplines, in particular also in practical and systematic theological studies, in which it is often referred to as a standard (or at least eminently viable) opinion. His work and his thesis concerning forgiveness have, therefore, a considerable impact and should accordingly be taken seriously as an exegetical conversation partner, which, so far, has hardly been done. The core of his thesis is that forgiveness is only possible in a hierarchical relationship. This contribution introduces Keene's central thesis, considers its substantiation and then analyses it in the sense of a critical evaluation, focusing on aspects, which have to do with (a) grammar and linguistics; (b) the linguistic creation of egalitarian relationships; (c) the intersectionality of intra-human hierarchies; (d) the role of martyrs in relation to forgiveness. In discussing these, incidental alternatives to Keene's exegetical choices will be offered. This approach also means that this contribution cannot do justice to the full scope of topics and themes associated with 'forgiveness' in the New Testament, but will remain focused on Keene's work, although the conclusions move beyond it as they also present the insights gained with regard to forgiveness in early

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Christianity through a critical interaction with Keene's work and the texts that he appeals to.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a small number of publications (in fact: only one),[1] Frederick ('Fred') W. Keene, a mathematician with an interest in 'Christian biblical theology',[2] has proposed a new understanding of how forgiveness works in the New Testament; his work is currently being received in both New Testament studies and related disciplines, in particular also in practical and systematic theological studies, in which it is often referred to as a standard (or at least eminently viable) opinion.[3] His work and his thesis concerning forgiveness

[1] Frederick W. Keene, 'Structures of forgiveness in the New Testament', in Carol J. Adams and Marie Fortune (eds.), *Violence Against Women and Children. A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (London: Continuum, 2010 [1995]), pp. 121–134. As the volume was inaccessible to me owing to the pandemic, I worked with the version that can be found online here: https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Structures-of-Forgiveness.pdf/?searchterm=None, accessed 7 January 2021 (14 pp.).

[2] The interest of Keene is described in the following publication: 'The Politics of Forgiveness: How the Christian Church Guilt-Trips Survivors' (http://reformation.com/CSA/HowtheChristianChurchGuilt-TripsSurvivors.htm, accessed 7 January 2021), where it is also mentioned that his wife is an abuse survivor who conducts workshops on the topic. Keene's pastoral concern is that he wants to move away from a situation in which pressure is exercised on disadvantaged persons to forgive with an appeal to biblical texts concerning forgiveness.

[3] F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage, *The Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), pp. 203–4; Marie M. Fortune, 'The Conundrum of Sin, Sex, Violence and Theodicee', in Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson (eds.), *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against* (Albany: SUNY, 2001), pp. 123–42, at 141; idem, 'Preaching Forgiveness', in John S. McClure and Nancy Jean Ramsay (eds.), *Telling the truth: Preaching about sexual and domestic violence* (Cleveland: United Church, 1998), pp. 49–57, at 55–6; Steven J. Sandage, 'Intersubjectivity and the Many Faces of Forgiveness', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 15 (2005), pp. 17–32, at 28; H.T. Close, *Becoming a Forgiving Person: A Pastoral Perspective* (New York: Routledge 2004), p. 44 critical; Slávka Michančová, 'Social Responsibility within Thinking about Forgiveness', *e-Theologos* 1 (2010), pp. 223–243, at 236; Tormod Kleiven, '"– Slik som vi tilgir våre skyldnere": Å tilgi sin neste – evangelium eller kristenplikt?', *Tidsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* 28 (2011), pp. 40–50, at 45–6, idem, 'Jeg sa unnskyld! Om tilgivelsens innhold og relevans i møte med barn og unge', *Prismet* 72 (2021), pp. 215–32, at 220; Tomas Erzar and Katarina Kompan Erzar, 'The Process of Forgiveness: "No More a Servant, but a Son"', in Robert Petkovsek and Bojan Zalec (eds.), *Truth and Compassion* (Zürich: LIT, 2017), pp. 145–52, at 148; Hilary Jerome Scarsella and Stephanie Krehbiel, 'Sexual Violence: Christian Theological Legacies and Responsibilities', *Religion Compass* 13 (2019): e12337, p. 5; Slavka Karkoskova, 'Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Context of Serious Crime',

have, therefore, a considerable impact and should hence be taken seriously exegetically. Keene's work aims emphatically at uncovering an understanding of forgiveness that is helpful in situations, in which such forgiveness may be needed, and seeks to formulate conditions for the possibility for such forgiveness; my contention is that it is exegetically mistaken. The core of his thesis is that forgiveness is only possible in a hierarchical relationship (a superior forgiving an inferior) or, in some instances, between equals. His focus is exclusively on intra-human forms of forgiveness, excluding Jesus' forgiveness of sins (which will also not be discussed here). Keene does not give a precise definition of forgiveness, but, as a discussion of his work will show, the kind of forgiveness that he seems to have in mind is one that comes close to the 'letting go' of an offence, or the removal of a debt (whether moral or spiritual). Importantly, Keene's work is driven by his desire to relieve those who have been victimized in some way from the pressure of being obliged to forgive (as this would be a 'Christian duty'). A desire for good forms of forgiveness is certainly shared by me as well and, although I will restrict myself to historical and exegetical matters

in idem and Lenka Hola (eds.), *Resolving Disputes in the 21st Century* (Budapest: Muhely, 2013), pp. 62–91, at 80, J. Edward Ellis, 'Experiencing God's Healing Power: A New Testament Perspective on Sexual Abuse', in Andrew J. Schmutzer (ed.), *The Long Journey Home* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), pp. 155–68, at 162–3; Eva Kahana, Boaz Kahana, Timothy Goler, and Julia Kay Wolf, 'Forgiveness: Complexities and Paradoxes in the Context of Genocide and Slavery', in Sheila Bibb (ed.), *Forgiveness or Revenge? Restitution or Retribution?* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 87–98, at 89; Mark Yantzi, *Sexual Offending and Restoration* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009 [1998]), p. 131; Gordon Zerbe, 'Forgiveness and the Transformation of Conflict: The Continuity of a Biblical Paradigm', in idem (ed.), *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008 [2001]), pp. 235–55, at 236; Annie Tinsley, *A Postcolonial African American Re-reading of Colossians* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 133 (the work is also cited in Kristina Augst, *Auf dem Weg zu einer traumagerechten Theologie: Religiöse Aspekte in der Traumatherapie-Elemente heilsamer religiöser Praxis* [(Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011)]); Boaz Kahana, Eva Kahana, and Julia Kay Wolf, 'Grappling with Forgiveness: Perspectives of Jewish, LGBT and Roma Holocaust Survivors', in Susie DiVietro and Jordan Kiper (eds.), *Perspectives on Forgiveness* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 181–200; Marie M. Fortune, 'Pastoral responses to sexual assault and abuse: Laying a foundation', *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 3 (2002), pp. 91–112; Denise J. J. Dijk, 'Reconciliation: A Real Possibility for Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Pastoral Relationships?', *Liturgy* 23 (2008), pp. 11–18 (at the time of writing inacessible due to Covid-19); Hansen-Couturier, 'Vergeef', p. 30.

here,[4] it should be noted that in discussions of earlier versions of this paper, it was often questioned whether Keene's proposal would really be beneficial to people who have been wronged.[5]

Keene's position leads to the conviction that (according to New Testament sources) (a) higher-ranking individuals can only be forgiven when they step down; (b) the freedom of inferior-ranking persons to forgive is limited and can only be exercised in situations of at least equality; (c) higher-ranking persons can determine whether they want to be forgiven, or to permit others to get in a position to forgive, or not (by stepping down or not). A consequence of this position is that the possibility of forgiveness is made conditional on the willingness of the offending party, which severely limits the (possible, not necessary) agency of an indebted or injured person to forgive, should this person be lower ranking socially.

In what follows, after introducing Keene's central thesis, I will briefly consider his substantiation of the same and then analyse it

[4] Although I will focus on historical and exegetical questions only here, I do note that for Keene the practical result is a hermeneutically somewhat biblicist understanding of forgiveness: today it should be exactly the way in which it was in the New Testament and its cultural context.

[5] When presenting this paper, it has been pointed out to me, for instance, that Keene's position can also be unhelpful for people who have been disadvantaged, quite contrary to his intention of helping disadvantaged people by freeing them from the obligation to forgive. This is the case, for instance, when people suffer from a sense of being rejected (and themselves unforgiven) by God because they are not in position (i.e., on an equal footing with or superior to the offending party) to forgive those who have injured them, thereby foregoing the possibility of receiving divine forgiveness themselves. While this might not apply to everyone, what would apply to everyone is that the 'structure of forgiveness' as proposed by Keene makes the possibility of forgiveness dependent on the willingness of a superior person to give up a superior position in order to be able to receive forgiveness. Quite apart from the question whether people would be willing to take this step, Keene's position also has as a direct consequence that the ability to be able to forgive as a disadvantaged person depends on the goodwill of the offending party, thereby enhancing the dependence of the former on the latter and reinforcing the existing imbalance in power even further. The price that Keene and those following him would have to pay for a situation in which there is no pressure to forgive is high: a formal inability to forgive in a great many situations and an increased dependence of disadvantaged persons on those who offended against them. As the purpose of this paper is not a (pastoral) psychological one, but only an exegetical one, I cannot discuss these consequences of Keene's position here, but only note them for the sake of completeness; the validity of a historical reconstruction does, as such, not depend on its consequences and it is, therefore, that I do not judge Keene's thesis on the basis of its potentially damaging consequences, but only on the basis of its exegetical merits.

in the sense of a critical evaluation, focusing on aspects, which have to do with (a) grammar and linguistics; (b) the linguistic creation of egalitarian relationships; (c) the intersectionality of intra-human hierarchies; (d) the role of martyrs in relation to forgiveness. At times, exegetical alternatives to Keene's analyses will be offered. This approach also means that this contribution cannot do justice to the full scope of topics and themes associated with 'forgiveness' in the New Testament,[6] but will remain focused on Keene's work, although the conclusions move beyond it as they also present the insights gained with regard to forgiveness in early Christianity through a critical interaction with Keene's work and the texts that he appeals to. A particular proposal made in the course of this interaction and in the conclusions is that forgiveness can be seen as the prefigurative enactment of restored relationships that is characteristic of God's upcoming rule.

2. The 'Keene Thesis'

Keene's thesis concerning forgiveness in the New Testament is based on insights derived from the social-scientific school of exegesis. I present its main concerns by means of two lengthier quotations; subsequently, I showcase his analysis of New Testament gospel passages (and leave his briefer discussion of epistolary and other materials aside for practical reasons—in his argument, his uses of these texts are supplementary). The first of the two longer quotations just mentioned runs as follows and outlines the basis of his view of the work of Malina and Neyrey:

The concept of forgiveness would have been difficult, and sometimes even dangerous, in the agonistic society of the first century Mediterranean world. One person forgiving another would have been seen as laudable only if the forgiver were in a higher socioeconomic position than the forgiven, and hence in a position to act as a patron. Even then, the receiver of forgiveness would have been expected to seek the forgiveness—that is, the receiver would need to offer to become a client, unless already born into

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[6] For surveys, see Hubert Frankemölle, 'Vergebung der Sünden III: Neues Testament', in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie 34* (2006), pp. 668–77, and Rainer Metzner, 'Sünde/Schuld und Vergebung, V. Neues Testament', in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, band 7 (4th edn., 2004), pp. 1876–81. A more encompassing survey can be found in Tobias Hack, *Ermöglichte Vergebung. Zur bibeltheologischen Fundierung eines zentralen Begriffs christlicher Ethik* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2018).

clientship. This is because in an agonistic society an offer of forgiveness is a challenge to the honor of the person being forgiven, at least in the case of a male recipient (Malina [1981], 30–33, 79–82; Malina and Neyrey [1991], 49–52); it may have been a positive challenge, but a challenge nevertheless. Such a challenge from an inferior would be an insult, but from a superior or an equal could be accepted. It would depend on how it was proffered. Thus in the first century Mediterranean world, the problem with forgiveness would not be with whether repentance was required, either before it was offered or in order to accept it. The problem with forgiveness would lie in the context in which it was offered or available: who forgave, who was forgiven, and what was the nature of the relationship between them that caused the question of forgiveness to arise in the first place.[7]

In the next quotation, Keene summarizes how his findings 'point' to a 'model of forgiveness', which is his own further development of insights concerning honour and shame; in doing so he goes beyond the work of Malina, Neyrey, and other representatives of the social-scientific 'school' of exegesis to which Keene appeals:

This cultural-anthropological picture points to a model of forgiveness, and possibly of repentance, that can be examined in terms of the words and the structures of the New Testament. The model would posit that, from the point of view of the New Testament, interpersonal forgiveness is possible only when, within the context of the interaction in which the question of forgiveness arises, the putative forgiver is more powerful than, or at least an equal of, the person being forgiven. In particular, it is not possible from the point of view of the New Testament for one person to forgive another person of greater power. This would mean that if a tenant has a grievance against a landlord as part of their landlord/tenant relationship, the tenant not only is not called upon to forgive, but in fact cannot forgive the landlord so long as that relationship exists—and this is independent of whether or not the landlord 'makes restitution.' It would also mean that if a man beats his wife, the battered woman not only is not required to forgive her husband, but in fact should not forgive him so long as the hierarchical power relationship exists within the marriage. The tenant can forgive a financial wrong only of a financial equal (or inferior).

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[7] Keene, 'Structures', p. 2; the references are to: Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (3rd edn., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001 [1981]) and idem and Jerome H. Neyrey, 'Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World', in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts. Models for Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 25–65. None of these two texts discusses forgiveness explicitly on the pages indicated by Keene.

A wife can forgive a marital wrong only as a marital equal. Within the Christian context, a landlord might be expected to forgive the debts of his tenants, but he cannot and should not expect to be forgiven for any wrongs he has committed—unless, possibly, he ceases to be a landlord.[8]

The substantiation of this thesis is offered through a series of exegetical observations, focusing on the verbs ἀφίημι (and the noun ἄφεσις), χαρίζομαι, and ἀπολύω,[9] showing how at least equality between partners is required for forgiveness to work, but even this is for Keene the exception to the rule. The rule he finds, for instance, in the 'forgiveness' petition of the Lord's Prayer, which he (plausibly) interprets in economic terms and as a confirmation of his own thesis:

To be indebted in a commercial transaction is to be in the inferior position; the creditor is in the position of power. Thus the hierarchy is that we forgive those over whom we have power; therefore we can ask God, who has infinite power, to forgive us. Nothing is said about those who have power over us and against whom we might have a grievance. In this situation, forgiveness flows down, from the more powerful to the less powerful.[10]

Also the discussion of the petition of the Lord's Prayer in Matt. 6:14–15 is considered to be a case of confirmation:

Forgiveness continues to flow down from the more powerful to the less powerful in the discussion in Matthew 6:14–15 of the forgiveness petition from the Lord's Prayer, and in the similar discussion in Mark 11:25.[11]

Later in his discussion, Keene gives pertinent aspects of Luke 7:36–50 and Matt. 18:21–35 a similar treatment: a debt implies a hierarchy; hence the creditor must have power over the debtor to be able to forgive. To both, I will return later, but I note it here. Next, a pertinent passage from the Gospel of Luke is commented upon:

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[8] Keene, 'Structures', pp. 2–3.

[9] An approach through particular terms has obvious weaknesses—for instance, 'performed' instances of forgiveness, such as in the parable of the forgiving father in Luke 15, that do not use this vocabulary remain undiscussed—this question of method cannot, however, concern me at this point.

[10] Keene, 'Structures', p. 5.

[11] Keene, 'Structures', p. 5.

This trend also is found in the unique saying in Luke 6:37–38a in the Sermon on the Plain: 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive (apoluo), and you will be forgiven (apoluo); give, and it will be given to you.' (Luke 6:37a parallels Matthew 7:11.) In each of these commands, the clause in the passive voice is in the 'divine passive' used to avoid a direct reference to God. This would point to a replication of the power driven hierarchy already seen, except that the word for forgive/forgiven used here is apoluo, not aphiēmi. In fact, this is the only place in the New Testament where apoluo is used to indicate forgiveness.[12]

Of course, Keene is right that the use of the verb ἀπολύω implies a difference in power; if one party can send the other away, this party must have power over the other. Whether this means that this party always has to be of socially superior status vis-à-vis of the other, or has power over the other in a more general sense (beyond a particular debt), is, however, not implied by this. In some situations, this may be the case, e.g., when a husband sends away his wife (see e.g., Mark 10:1–12 par.); in others, for instance when one party is financially indebted to another, it is not the case that the hierarchy of power created by this debt parallels other hierarchies.

Naturally, the parable of the unforgiving δοῦλος also receives discussion (Matt. 18:21–35, par. Luke 17:3–4—following Keene's parallels):

Here is one of the few cases where an absolute hierarchy is not set up; a 'brother' or 'another disciple' or 'a member of the church' is neither above nor below the person offended, but is an equal. While forgiveness is neither expected nor required when the offender is higher in the power hierarchy—indeed, it probably is neither possible nor desirable—it is expected when the person is an equal in the power structure.[13]

The final text is the last word of Jesus on the cross in Luke, it is discussed as follows:

The final example of humans forgiving humans within the gospels is also the only example that presents the question of one with less power forgiving those with relatively more power. It is Luke 23:34,

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[12] Keene, 'Structures', pp. 5–6.
[13] Keene, 'Structures', p. 7.

Then Jesus said, 'Father forgive (aphiēmi) them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

one of the Last Words on the Cross. This is a situation where Jesus has no power; he is speaking from a cross about those who have crucified him. What is noticeable is that he does not forgive them. Instead, he asks his Father, he asks God, to forgive them. Having no power within the situation, he cannot forgive. About the only way the structures of power can be invoked for forgiveness is the way Jesus chose: to ask God, who remains all powerful, to forgive. This is the one place where, if Jesus wanted the weak to forgive the strong, he could have indicated it. He did not. He asked the strongest to forgive, and, being the less powerful, did not offer the forgiveness himself. The relative positioning within the power structures remain[s] the same: only the more powerful can be expected to forgive. The less powerful are not expected to forgive, and, in the case of Jesus on the cross, do not forgive the more powerful.[14]

With this, a representative impression has been given of Keene's interpretation of pertinent passages in the New Testament (texts from other sources than the gospels have, as was indicated, not been discussed; they show the same pattern and are also presented in a more supplementary way by Keene). I now turn to a number of critical observations.

3. Beyond the 'Keene Thesis'

When considering the 'Keene thesis', a number of observations can be offered. In doing so, forgiveness will be understood relatively broadly, i.e., as intra-human behaviour that aims to reconstitute a relationship between persons that has been damaged or become imbalanced owing to a variety of possible reasons, including (economic) debt and offenses (violence, theft, insults, etc.).[15] At the same time, forgiveness

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[14] Keene, 'Structures', p. 8.

[15] A more precise definition is, of course, possible, but not necessary—in fact, it might limit the scope of the research too much: forgiveness is, in the New Testament, also debt forgiveness, for instance, and not just the forgiveness of 'sins' or forms of abuse, as it has been argued by a series of scholars, e.g., with reference to the Lord's prayer; see, e.g., Giovanni Battista Bazzana, 'Basileia and Debt Relief: The Forgiveness of Debts in the Lord's Prayer in the Light of Documentary Papyri', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011), pp. 511–25. A definition as it is offered by Dorothee Schlenke would then, already, be too narrow: 'Zwischenmenschliche Vergebung bezieht sich auf Schuld …, das heißt auf eine verantwortlich zurechenbare moralische Verletzung im Verhältnis von Personen. Als Prozess der Wiederherstellung symmetrischer moralischer Beziehung schließt Vergebung eine Reihe wechselseitiger Vollzüge von Anerkennung ein …: die Anerkennung der moralischen Verletzung (Betroffenheit, Übelnehmen bzw. Reue),

will be discussed with a particular focus as well, namely with special attention to the relationship between social hierarchy and (the possibility of) forgiveness, as this is at the core of the 'Keene thesis'.

As a consequence, only one aspect of intra-human forgiveness in the New Testament, which is a topic that has engendered and continues to engender much discussion as such,[16] will be discussed. Other aspects of forgiveness in the New Testament can only be acknowledged here; for instance, the topic of forgiveness of sins of the world as such through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection cannot be discussed separately and only marginally in its relationship to intra-human forgiveness.[17] I note this restriction is relevant for what follows, because the call upon human beings to forgive each other and to do so in a certain imitation of God in early Christian texts is grounded in the παράδειγμα of Jesus as God's earthly envoy and representative.[18] Extending forgiveness to others is an imitation of

die Bereitschaft zur Wiederherstellung der moralischen Beziehung im Sinne wechselseitiger Anerkennung der moralischen Integrität (Vergebungsbereitschaft bzw. Vergebungsbitte) und schließlich die Gewährung bzw. Annahme der Vergebung. Vergebung beruht somit zentral auf der Unterscheidung der Person von ihrem empirisch konkreten So-Sein in der schuldhaften Tat, welche der schuldig gewordenen Person nur durch die vergebende Person als neue Lebensmöglichkeit zugesprochen werden kann.' (Dorothee Schlenke, 'Vergebung', *WiReLex*, https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/200658/, accessed 7 January 2021).

[16] Single New Testament gospels and their discussion already give rise to entire monographs; for instance, see, e.g., Isaac Kahwa Mbabazi, *The Significance of Interpersonal Forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013), or also Giambrone, *Charity*. Given the coherence of thought, at least as it is reconstructed by New Testament scholars, about (intra-human) forgiveness in the New Testament, remarks about the relative paucity of texts about this topic and the lack of systematic philosophical reflection on it, such as those of David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), pp. 123–4, are somewhat surprising.

[17] The two are, of course, related to each other, while forgiveness of sins is only one dimension of Markan soteriology; see for a recent discussion: David S. du Toit, 'Heil und Unheil. Die Soteriologie des Markusevangeliums', in idem, Christine Gerber and Christiane Zimmermann (eds.), *Sotēria: Salvation in Early Christianity and Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 186–208, esp. 196–7, 202–5.

[18] This topic is very rich and cannot be explored fully here. On *paradeigmata* in Pauline Christianity, see, for instance: Peter-Ben Smit, *Paradigms of Being in Christ: Paul's Use of Exempla in Philippians* (Library of New Testament Studies; London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Also other strands of early Christian tradition utilize the notion of imitation. This includes Eph. 4:32–33, which may well contain a pun, in the formulation γίνεσθε [δὲ] εἰς ἀλλήλους χρηστοί, εὔσπλαγχνοι, χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς, καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν Χριστῷ ἐχαρίσατο ὑμῖν; the word χρηστοί will have sounded very similar to the plural of 'Christ', the imitation of whom is, in v. 33, indicated as the basis for the 'kind' behaviour of the Ephesians. Imitation empowers—the Ephesians are 'Christs' for each other.

God in Christ, and Christ's (and God's) performance of forgiveness provides the basis of the possibility of intra-human forgiveness.[19] At the same time, the praxis of the forgiveness of sins, as presented in early Christian texts, can well be seen as a prefigurative anticipation of the kingdom (even by people who remain in need of forgiveness themselves),[20] as it has been disclosed (and has been mediated) in Jesus' work.[21] For reasons of space, however, these dimensions of forgiveness among humans in early Christian sources can only be noted here.

[19] As, for instance, discussed extensively (on the basis of a differentiated understanding of interpersonal forgiveness) by Hack, *Vergebung*. – A very direct example of the gift to forgive (in the sense of empowerment) might be Matt. 16:19 and John 20:22–23.

[20] A position and praxis that are not expressive of hypocrisy, but of hope. See Thomas Söding, 'Vergebung der Sünden: Soteriologische Perspektiven des Neuen Testaments', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 115 (2018), pp. 402–24. Analogously: John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 493–519. See also Hack, *Vergebung*. An important conversation partner is, in contemporary philosophy regarding the gift and forgiveness, Jacques Derrida, in particular: 'On Forgiveness', in idem, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 27–58; idem, 'On Forgiveness', *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 2 (2000), pp. 81–102, which has informed broader discussions of the gift and forgiveness, such as in for instance, the contribution on the gift and forgiveness in Veronika Hoffmann, Ulrike Link-Wieczorek, and Christof Mandry (eds.), *Die Gabe. Zum Stand der interdisziplinären Diskussion* (Freiburg i. Br.: Alber, 2017). Similarly important, if not rather more, are the considerations of Hannah Arendt regarding forgiveness, especially in her *The Human Condition* (2nd edn., Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998 [1958]). Systematic-theological–oriented contributions also interact with this philosopher; see, for instance, Magdalene L. Frettlöh, '"Der Mensch heißt Mensch, weil er … vergibt"? Philosophisch-politische und anthropologische Vergebungs-Diskurse im Licht der fünften Vaterunser-Bitte', in Jürgen Ebach, Magdalene L. Frettlöh, and Hans M. Gutmann (eds.), *'Wie? Auch wir vergeben unsern Schuldigern?' Mit Schuld leben* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004), pp. 179–215, and idem, 'Leben aus der Hoffnung auf die Zurechtbringung aller', *Evangelische Theologie* 74 (2014), pp. 364–79. Frettlöh's systematic theological considerations are compatible with the emphasis placed on what may be called realized (or prefigured) eschatology by Söding, 'Vergebung', and Barclay, *Paul*, pp. 493–519, as well as with Hack, *Vergebung*. The emphasis on eschatology would also invite considering people who have forgiven or who have been forgiven as having moved beyond the binary of victim and perpetrator into a new kind of existence, which would fit the emphasis on eschatological transformation as it is part and parcel of New Testament theological anthropology; this is also proposed by Mathias Wirth, 'Trostlose Eschatologie? Zu einer unerledigten Kontroverse über Versöhnung in der neueren Dogmatik', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 58 (2016), pp. 259–84.

[21] As Martinus C. de Boer, 'Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18: 23–35)', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988), pp. 214–32, 231–2, puts it.

Also another dimension of the language used concerning the forgiveness of debt, or sins, cannot be discussed at any length here: the prevalence of imagery drawn from the field of financial transactions and economy in general.[22] It must suffice to underline three things: first, financial debt often functions as a metaphor for what can also be captured by the term 'sin'; second, there is a clear fluidity between 'sin' and 'debt' (in the financial sense): real financial debts could also be forgiven in quite the literal sense of the word; third, clearly, thinking about the one kind of debt and the other kind of debt was characterized by a certain fluidity (at least could forgiveness of both of them be conceptualized in the same manner (especially: with the same vocabulary?)—it might, in fact, be more the modern mind that has difficulties with this, as it is (often) wont to think of sin and (financial) debt as different things, than the ancient mind, which, as the sources show, was quite capable of speaking about them, and about their forgiveness, in analogous, if not identical ways. Here, however, this is not the main topic, the question of (social) hierarchy in relation to the possibility of forgiveness is. In discussing this, however, financial imagery will play a role.

4. Grammatical and Linguistic Considerations

First, a brief grammatical and linguistic consideration. As having become clear above, Keene's concern with hierarchy and verbs (and incidental nouns) referring to forgiveness means that he is attentive to who acts on whom. Naturally, a transitive verb with both a direct and an indirect object (I give you something) suggests that one person has power over another, which is precisely indicated by the *agens*. Yet, care should be taken, and my impression is that Keene does not always take this care. For instance, prior to approaching Mark 11:25 (*Καὶ ὅταν στήκετε προσευχόμενοι, ἀφίετε εἴ τι ἔχετε κατά τινος, ἵνα καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφῇ ὑμῖν τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν*), Keene notes that the language used has a background in economy and has to do with being indebted and thus with power: 'To be indebted in a commercial transaction is to be in the inferior position; the creditor is in the position of power. Thus the hierarchy is that we forgive those over whom we have

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[22] See for a recent discussion: Anthony Giambrone, *Sacramental Charity, Creditor Christology, and the Economy of Salvation in Luke's Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), esp. pp. 68–86 (survey of debt and sin in early Judaism).

power; therefore we can ask God, who has infinite power, to forgive us.'[23] Of course, the terminology for forgiveness is premised on the idea that there is something to forgive a person; this implies power and agency on the part of who does the forgiving (for instance in the case of debt forgiveness), but this does *not* mean necessarily that there is also hierarchy in other respects. Keene continues his discussion of this text by stating, 'Nothing is said about those who have power over us and against whom we might have a grievance. In this situation, forgiveness flows down, from the more powerful to the less powerful.' Yet, what he loses sight of is that precisely the economic language used here is suggestive of situations of multiple forms of hierarchy that play a role simultaneously and that make situations in which forgiveness occurs more complex. In fact, it is perfectly well possible that a person of higher social rank is financially indebted to someone of lower rank, which would place this latter party in a position to forgive, while the former could still retain his socially superior and more powerful position. That this could, at least, be the case among equals is indicated by the parable on forgiveness in Matt. 18:23–35, where both forgiveness from a higher-ranking individual (a king) to one of his slaves and forgiveness among 'fellow slaves' (σύνδουλοι) is mentioned. In Mark 11:25, there is, grammatically speaking, also no reason to suspect that the people that are to be forgiven according to Jesus are hierarchically below the person praying in any other sense than being indebted (in whichever way) to this person. That the reference to the 'person' who is to be forgiven is very generic is also indicated by the language that is used: κατά τινος (cf., e.g., Job 31:35 LXX, where the same expression is an unspecific reference to an adversary).

Therefore, instead of focusing on already existing social hierarchy that somehow governs the possibilities of forgiveness, one could instead say that debt (of whichever kind) always creates its own kind of dependencies and hierarchies, which do not have to agree with other kinds of hierarchy that affect people at the same time (cf. below). In fact, the former part of this observation would be in agreement with something that Keene argues himself, i.e., 'To be indebted in a commercial transaction is to be in the inferior

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[23] Keene, 'Structures', p. 5; this asking for forgiveness is, of course, a form of prayer, which also includes agency of the debtor vis-à-vis of the creditor and with that the exercise of power. See for an encompassing review of prayer and forgiveness: Sönke von Stemm, *Der betende Sünder vor Gott. Studien zu Vergebungsvorstellungen in urchristlichen und frühjüdischen Texten* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

position; the creditor is in the position of power. Thus the hierar-
chy is that we forgive those over whom we have power.'[24] However,
such indebtedness can exist alongside and even in contrast with
other forms of inequality in a relationship, and this should not be
conflated, which is what Keene seems to do.

Beyond this, grammar and its interpretation are also of signifi-
cance when Keene appeals to the concept of the 'divine passive'
in order to further his interpretation of Luke 6:37 (*Καὶ μὴ κρίνετε,
καὶ οὐ μὴ κριθῆτε· καὶ μὴ καταδικάζετε, καὶ οὐ μὴ καταδικασθῆτε.
ἀπολύετε, καὶ ἀπολυθήσεσθε*): true, given v. 36 (*γίνεσθε οἰκτίρμονες
καθὼς [καὶ] ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν οἰκτίρμων ἐστίν*), God plays a role here,
yet the reciprocity between forgiving (unnamed others—the object
is not defined) and the absence of an explicit *agens* due to the use
of the second person plural of the passive voice leaves open who
will return forgiveness. For Keene, the *agens* must be God, as God
alone is superior to all and can therefore forgive always. Yet, this
is not necessary: this kind of the use of the passive can also be
used in order to highlight the action, rather than the actor,[25] which
would suit the rhetorical purpose of Luke 6:37 well, as its point is
a form of reciprocity centred on a human being: forgiving leads to
receiving forgiveness, stressing God's agency is not necessary in
this setting, underlining the parallel between giving and receiving
forgiveness is, and this is facilitated by the passive form used. If
this is the case, concerns about social hierarchy do not play a role
of significance here at all, and the verse is rather a call upon human
beings to forgive, empowering them to do so by the prospect of the
future reception of forgiveness for themselves, instead of a limita-
tion on the possibilities of forgiveness. Read in this manner, the
verse certainly does not limit possibilities of forgiveness, as Keene
suggests, but rather seems to call upon human beings to forgive
more generously.

5. An Egalitarian Ethos

This first set of observations leads to another point: the construc-
tion of forms of (in)equality in texts. Keene argues that in a number

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[24] Keene, 'Structures', p. 5.
[25] See Peter-Ben Smit and Toon Renssen, 'The *passivum divinum*: The Rise and
Future Fall of an Imaginary Linguistic Phenomenon', *Filología Neotestamentaria*
47 (2015), pp. 3–24.

of texts, for instance in the appertaining petition in the Lord's Prayer that not just the hierarchy caused by indebtedness plays a role, but also the absolute hierarchy between God and human beings.[26] However, precisely in the texts that Keene refers to, another pattern is visible that counters Keene's assumption that wherever there is forgiveness, there must also be hierarchy.[27] In texts such as, indeed, the Lord's Prayer, but also the parable of the unforgiving δοῦλος (Matt. 18:21–35, see also vv. 15–20), there is a clear hierarchy between humans and the divine (referred to with terms such as God, Lord, King, etc.) and just as unclear a hierarchy (beyond the hierarchy caused by indebtedness) between the human beings involved; instead an egalitarian ethos seems to be emphasized.

The New Testament texts that Keene draws on also do not work with the notion of the coinciding of the hierarchy created by indebtedness and other social hierarchies. As Keene admits with regard to Matt. 18: here only the hierarchy of creditor and debtor is in view. Beyond this, it is also striking that in the narrative leading up to the parable, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive one of the ἀδελφοί who had sinned against him; the expression ἀδελφοί also suggests equality, rather than hierarchy. One could add that this also applies to the unidentified parties in Mark 11:25 (as argued above), and also to the 'people' referred to in Matt. 6:14–16 (ἐὰν … ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις in vv. 14–15).[28] In fact, it is inviting to see these (and other) texts as constructing a generic and even egalitarian group of people, reminiscent of the 'fictive kinship' of early Christians,[29] who can all be treated the same and who, in fact,

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[26] The question of kenosis cannot be taken into consideration here.

[27] In fact, Keene's argument would seem to be a form of *petitio principii*: forgiveness implies debt, which implies indebtedness, which implies some sort of hierarchy between debtor and creditor; therefore, the creditor must be in a position of power over the debtor in order to forgive the latter's debt.

[28] A reference that agrees well with, for example, one of the likely backgrounds of the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples here, i.e., Sir. 28:1–5, where the following is stated in v. 2: ἄφες ἀδίκημα τῷ πλησίον σου καὶ τότε δεηθέντος σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου λυθήσονται; no hierarchy seems to be in view here. Cf. Marcel Poorthuis and Theo de Kruijff, *Avinoe. De joodse achtergronden van het Onze Vader* (2nd edn., Baarn: Adveniat, 2017), pp. 136–7.

[29] On which, see, for instance: Halvor Moxnes, *Constructing Early Christian Families. Family as Social Reality and Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997). Groups of which the members referred to each other as ἀδελφοί existed throughout the Greco-Roman world and also included voluntary associations (*all* members of which, not just the socially lower-ranking ones, could become indebted when not paying their fees); see John Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations* (New Haven: Yale, 2019), pp. 204–5, 234–5.

are subject to the same call to (reciprocal) forgiveness issued by
Jesus in these texts. That this is the case, need not surprise us, of
course, when taking into account that such intra-human behaviour
is in the Jesus tradition (and well beyond that) substantiated with
reference to the idea of the *imitatio Dei*. All addressed by Jesus (in
the Gospels) are called upon to join in this imitation without any
difference, which includes a call to forgiveness that does not seem
to be restricted by social hierarchy. That this attitude may be to
the (financial) detriment of the one forgiving is part of this pic-
ture. A text like Luke 6:30–38 indicates this by calling for both an
attitude of mercy ($οἰκτίρμων$) and a costly form of forgiving debts
to debtors, whose social status is not made explicit. In Matthew's
representation of this tradition, this attitude is even associated
with being 'perfect' ($τέλειος$) as God is 'perfect' (Matt. 5:48). In
other words: although divine–human relations are (always) hier-
archical, also when it comes to forgiveness, intra-human relations
are, at least in as far as such relations in the congregation are con-
cerned, constructed not hierarchically. Instead, one can observe an
emphasis on an egalitarian ethos; accordingly, forgiveness is seen
as a very real and desirable possibility among all human beings.[30]
Because of the association of the imitation of God and forgiveness,
one could even argue that human beings are empowered to forgive
through the imitation of God (and God's representative, Christ),
quite irrespective of their social standing and beyond what is com-
mon in society (see, for instance the extremes to which followers of
Jesus are called to in Luke 6:30–38).

A final point that can be made here is that those in a socially
equal (or possibly even higher) position are certainly not, or at least
not always, depicted as free to grant or withhold forgiveness. In
fact, the parable in Matthew 18:21–35 focuses precisely on this:[31]
the one $δοῦλος$ who much has been forgiven is expected to forgive

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[30] Which should, of course, not lead to pressure to forgive, which is something
that Keene, with many others, cautions against, but that is not my topic here.

[31] On which, also in relation to the possibilities for forgiveness in contemporary
South Africa, see Dion A. Foster, *The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness? An Empirical
Intercultural Bible Reading of Matthew 18.15–35* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019).
On Matthew and forgiveness in general (and with reference to the contemporary
philosophical and ethical discussion on forgiveness), see, e.g., Moises Mayordomo,
'Zwischenmenschliche Vergebung in der Perspektive des Matthäusevangeliums',
in Ulrike Link-Wieczorek (ed.), *Verstrickt in Schuld, gefangen von Scham?*
(Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2015), pp. 155–73. In his discussion, no
emphasis on social hierarchy can be found.

his σύνδουλος (the forgiveness concerns a financial debt, in the world of the parable, but see the preceding vv. 15–20, in which the verb ἁμαρτάνω points to more than financial debt). The result is that the unforgiving δοῦλος becomes himself, as it were, indebted again, in the sense that he is held accountable, quite literally, by the κύριος in the parable. However, this obligation to forgive as one has oneself been forgiven does not translate into an unqualified obligation to forgive anything and everything for two reasons. First, the lead-in to the parable is not the question as to whether one should forgive always, but whether there is, at least in theory, a limit to forgiveness (vv. 21–22). Second, the theoretical unlimited nature of forgiveness in the kingdom is then illustrated with the parable (from v. 23 onwards), which also indicates a *limit* to forgiveness (rather the opposite of arguing for a boundless demand for the same, no matter what); this limit is activated, as it were, if someone who has received an overwhelming kind of forgiveness on a certain plane (financial debt, in this case) refuses a much smaller kind of forgiveness on the same level. With regard to the 'Keene thesis' this implies that, at least with regard to Matt. 18:21–35, not only is social hierarchy not a requirement for being able to grant forgiveness, but also that social equality is not an excuse for not forgiving someone on the same social plane.

6. The Hierarchy of Debt

The previous section also implies something else: when in a group a different hierarchy could (not always: did) exist than outside of it, apparently hierarchies are multidimensional, or, alternatively, one could try to describe the social position of persons as part of a web of intersecting (at least partially) hierarchical relationships that are not always aligned with each other and between which a tension can easily exist. In this context, it is of interest to stress here that precisely money lending also took place among individuals of inverse social status (i.e., an inferiorly ranking person lending to a socially superior-ranking individual);[32] in such situations, any form of debt forgiveness will, therefore, also have

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[32] Zachary Herz, 'The Effect of Bankruptcy on Roman Imperial Credit Markets', *Business & Bankruptcy Law Review* 2 (2015) pp. 207–49, esp. 240–3.

had to take place within 'inverse' social lines.[33] This point has a further corollary: if debt creates *its own* hierarchy, as Keene also acknowledges, then his concern regarding the hierarchically equal or inferior position that is required to permit a creditor (of whichever kind: financial, moral, social, etc.) to forgive is, by and large, unfounded. Because if it is the hierarchy of debt that counts, then a creditor always ranks higher and is in power, at least in as far as a particular debt is concerned, vis-à-vis the indebted party. Other hierarchies do not need to be affected by this, or impede the 'debt hierarchy' to function. Naturally, the existence of different kinds of hierarchy (e.g., of indebtedness, of social rank, etc.) in a relationship can impact questions of forgiveness in other ways as well. For instance, someone with higher status can more easily demand forgiveness than someone who has a lower status. Similarly, someone in a lower position may find it more difficult to refuse the acceptance of forgiveness when it is offered by a social superior. Conversely, the loss of face associated with having to ask for forgiveness may make it more difficult for socially higher-ranking persons to do so and easier for lower-ranking ones. Yet, none of this makes forgiveness an impossibility.

Finally, the notion that debt creates its own kind of hierarchy suits some of the terminology used to refer to intra-human forgiveness in New Testament texts. While ἀφίημι/ἄφεσις can have the relatively gentle meaning of 'letting go' (although 'sending away' is also a possible meaning), the term ἀπολύω is much more forceful. This is evidenced by its use to indicate the sending away of wives in the context of (unilateral) divorce, and certainly implies a difference in power among the parties involved. The latter can also be said regarding χαρίζομαι, which is expressive of a gift relationship, as it would be typical of the many client–patron relationships in the Greco-Roman world. The one who receives forgiveness is, in a way, a client of the one who gives the forgiveness (cf. 2. Cor. 2:7.10).[34]

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[33] Interesting material emerges out of the Pompeian archives of the Sulpicii; cf. Gregory Rowe, 'Roman Law in Action: The Archive of the Sulpicii (TPSulp)', (Unpublished paper presented at the University of Southern California Center for Law, History and Culture, 7 February 2005; available at: http://www.law.usc.edu/centers/clhc/archives/workshops/documents/rowe.pdf, accessed 7 January 2021 [10 pp., esp. pp. 7–8].)

[34] See also the extensive treatment of the gift and the obligations to which it leads in Barclay, *Paul*.

7. Martyrdom and Forgiveness

Next, the last words of Jesus in Luke 23:34 (πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς) deserves some attention, given that Keene draws on them with regard to the relationship between martyrdom and forgiveness. Also its parallel in Acts 7:60 is of interest, although Keene does not discuss it, possibly because of a different vocabulary.[35] While it is true that neither the Lukan Jesus nor the Lukan Stephen forgive their executioners directly and in lieu of this they pray to God to offer such forgiveness, some considerations may complicate Keene's conviction that they pray to God for forgiveness because they themselves *cannot* forgive their social superiors.

First, Keene's contention that Jesus is socially lower ranking than others is doubtful, at least as far as the narrative world of Luke is concerned. It seems reasonable to think that for readers of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus, as Son of God, outranks everyone; rank is a matter of perspective, and in this case Luke's perspective should be given some weight at least. In fact, again multiple kinds of hierarchy that are not aligned with each other may be involved again. Of course, from the perspective of mainstream society, a crucified person is at the very bottom of any kind of social hierarchy. Yet, this kind of hierarchy is not what matters ultimately in the Gospel of Luke (the gospel that is probably the most interested in social reversal of all canonical gospels). Seen from the perspective not of the *imperium* (*Romanum*) but of the kingdom (of God), Jesus holds superior rank and would, according to Keene's theory, be able forgive everyone.

Second, it can be argued that what Jesus and Stephen do is expressive of their identity as righteous ones and as authentic martyrs. This is the case because their words indicate (a) that they intend to forgive their enemies; (b) that such forgiveness is precisely required of those who imitate God as righteous ones (Luke 6:27–36); (c) that they are martyrs who are able to intercede efficaciously with God. With regard to the first of these points, it can be argued that their own wish to forgive their enemies can be seen as being implied in their request to God to grant forgiveness to those executing them. Such a request stands to reason because the killing of a representative of someone in the ancient world is also a slight to the person who is being represented by a representative, in this

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[35] In Acts 7:60: μὴ στήσῃς αὐτοῖς ταύτην τὴν ἁμαρτίαν; in Luke 23:34: πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς.

case: God.[36] The second point is substantiated by the instructions
that the Lukan Jesus offers in Luke 6:27–36: God's righteous
ones also pray and forgive those who maltreat them. In fact, both
the death of Jesus and that of Stephen could be interpreted as
enactments of the prescripts given in Luke 6. The third and final
point draws on a broader tradition in ancient Judaism according to
which martyrs enjoyed the privilege of being able intercession on
behalf of the (sinful) Jewish people. The Maccabean martyrs are
one example of this tradition;[37] Jesus' and Stephen's attitude vis-
à-vis their henchmen may be another one, given that while they
are (also) being killed by representatives of the Jewish people, they
nonetheless pray for them.

In sum, the portrayal of Jesus' and Stephen's death does not
point into the direction of their inability to forgive at all, but, on
the contrary, it shows how their own willingness to forgive their
enemies, which marks them out as righteous ones, which translates
into their use of their privilege as martyrs to intercede with God,
who is being sinned against through the killing of God's repre-
sentatives, to forgive as well. In a way, Jesus and Stephen actually
invite God to join them in their forgiveness of their enemies.

8. The (Im)Possibility of Forgiveness

Finally, three remarks can be made concerning the possibility
and impossibility of forgiveness in New Testament texts, two of
which are also of importance for the manner in which forgiveness is
and is not framed. These remarks are offered here in response, also,
to Keene's concern that a demand for forgiveness that is pressed
on those who have been disadvantaged can be deeply problematic.

First, it is of significance to stress that the New Testament
does know of instances in which forgiveness is not an option. To
begin with, the absence of forgiveness is likely implied in the fate
of Judas, who is not forgiven for offending against Jesus in the

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[36] See in relation to letters and letter carriers in antiquity in general (and in rela-
tion to Paul and his letters): Peter M. Head, 'Named Letter-Carriers among the
Oxyrhynchus Papyri', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2009), pp.
279–99.

[37] On martyrs as intercessors in the Jewish tradition, see, e.g., Jan Willem van
Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and
4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

New Testament traditions concerning him.[38] Beyond this, reviling the Holy Spirit is deemed to be unforgiveable (Mark 3:28, Matt. 12:31, Luke 12:10).

Second, as forgiving can be argued to mean inhabiting the future kingdom of God in a prefigurative manner, this also means that both the 'already' and the 'not yet' are in play, which opens up a space for imperfection, which, in this case, means space for the impossibility of forgiveness in certain situations, however desirable it might be.

This second point feeds into the third one, which consists of the observation that in the New Testament, generally, the issue at hand when forgiveness is discussed is not whether forgiveness is possible as such, but that people should become forgivers. This already points to a tension between ideal and reality. It is fitting, therefore, that much emphasis seems to be placed on the empowerment of human beings to forgive. This is apparent from the few texts where human ability to forgive is problematized (such as Mark 2:7; compare Luke 5:21 and Matt. 9:2). In these texts, the point is precisely that Jesus enacts forgiveness as God's representative (his *imitatio Dei*, or *repraesentatio Dei*). In turn, both through *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Dei*, this becomes the foundation for the call and the empowerment of Jesus' followers to forgive. By sharing, as it were, in God's prerogative to forgive, human beings are also enabled to do so. The impossible possibility of forgiveness, as it has been called frequently,[39] can, thus, become reality. That this led to challenges is, of course, apparent from the existence of texts that call for the exercise of forgiveness: would it not have been a challenge, then these texts would not have existed.

9. Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to consider and critically discuss the 'Keene thesis' with regard to (intra-human) forgiveness in the New Testament. The main results can be summed up as follows.

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[38] This is not the case in all receptions of these traditions; e.g., Pope Francis, in a speech in St. John the Lateran on 16 June 2016, referred to a homily of Primo Mazzolari, preached on Maundy Thursday 1958, in which he drew attention to a capital in the church of St. Mary Magdalene in Vézelay (mid-12th century), on which both Judas' suicide by hanging is depicted and the carrying off of his body by none other than the Good Shepherd himself.

[39] Presumably echoing Karl Barth's use of the expression in order to refer to faith, e.g., in the English translation of his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (trans. E. C. Hoskyns; Oxford: Oxford University, 1968), e.g., p. 138.

First, there is little reason to assume that the writings of the New Testament as they were considered here (and appealed to by Keene) operate on the basis of an understanding of intra-human forgiveness that requires another form of social hierarchy between the forgiving and forgiven parties than the hierarchy created through debt (of whichever kind). With this, the core of Keene's thesis has become very questionable.

Second, it seems that, while human dependence on forgiveness from on high is assumed in these (and other) New Testament wrights, that the ideal that human forgiveness echoes such divine forms of pardon and empowered by it is key to the texts discussed above. In these sources, humans are described (and thereby constructed) as operating on one shared plane ('egalitarian ethos') and as exercising forgiveness reciprocally (and in anticipation of the full establishment of God's rule), without clear reference to social (or other) hierarchies. In fact, the terminology of ἀδελφοί or ἄνθρωποι that is used to indicate the groups and their members among whom forgiveness is to be enacted may well have an equalizing effect: the texts construct equality among people.[40]

Third, the reconstruction of social hierarchies, as suggested in the previous point and the focus on the 'hierarchy of indebtedness' as all that matters when it comes to forgiveness, as it was noted in the first point above, gives creditors (of whichever kind) much more space to grant forgiveness than would be the case in Keene's model. This does not mean that forgiveness was always experienced as a real possibility in early Christianity, of course: the frequent teaching on the subject in early writings suggests that forgiveness was a very contested issue indeed.

Finally, in calls on human beings to forgive in early Christian texts, often some form of empowerment to do so is mentioned. This can consist of connecting human forgiveness to the divine prerogative of forgiveness through the notions of *imitatio Dei* or *imitatio Christi*, or also of a reference to prior reception of (divine) forgiveness. Because such empowerment is emphasized, forgiveness also appears as something that is anything but a matter of course and as something that may well go beyond common human

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[40] Such an ethos of equality is not unproblematic, as it can mask and deny very real and influential hierarchies; e.g., a bishop's stating that he or she is 'simply one of the brothers and sisters' vis-à-vis of the clergy, while continuing to exercise his or her power to deploy this clergy as he or she sees fit without much consultation, suggests equality where there is none.

abilities as such. In this sense, forgiveness seems to be closely connected to the conditions of God's rule, the world to come, even before God's rule has arrived in its fullness. Thus, forgiveness can be understood as a form of prefiguration of God's rule, which anticipates an eschatological transformation and healing of relationships. The tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' can also imply that there are situations in which forgiveness is not possible, at least: not yet.