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# Did Jesus Oppose the *prosbul* in the Forgiveness Petition of the Lord's Prayer?

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## Abstract

The forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer includes the condition that the petitioner must forgive their own "debtors," widely taken to be a metaphorical reference to sin-forgiveness. In this article, I argue that to Jesus' contemporaries "debt" would have been an unusual way of referring to sin, and that the choices made by the Matthean and Lukan redactors show that they understood the Jesus-saying to enjoin debt-forgiveness as well as sin-forgiveness. The *prosbul* was the only way for pious contemporaries to avoid the Torah's requirement to periodically forgive debts, and so Jesus opposed the *prosbul* by enjoining precisely the behaviour which the *prosbul* made unnecessary.

## Keywords

debt – sin – *prosbul* – forgiveness – release

## 1 Introduction

The forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer includes the condition that the petitioner must forgive their own "debtors." I will argue that the historical Jesus chose the terminology of debt in order to enjoin his followers to forgive monetary debts, as well as sins, and that Jesus did so particularly to oppose the Pharisaic innovation of the *prosbul*, a legal device which allowed lenders to escape the debt release laws of the Torah.

The petition is unusual because it incorporates human action into a prayer,<sup>1</sup> and uses the language of debt.<sup>2</sup> Matt 6:12//Luke 11:4 are the primary witnesses to the Jesus-saying,<sup>3</sup> which is generally regarded as authentic.<sup>4</sup> Pointing to the parallelism between the debt language in the two halves of the petition, Strecker argues that “Matthew has the original wording,”<sup>5</sup> as Luke’s ἀμαρτίας in the first half of the petition is easier to explain as an explanatory substitution for ὀφειλήματα than the reverse. The consensus is that Matthew used ὀφείλω and ὀφειλέτης to gloss כוּחַ,<sup>6</sup> which could refer to debt or sin, and that Jesus used debt language here in a metaphorical sense for sin.<sup>7</sup>

Two aspects of the Prayer suggest that Jesus had debt-forgiveness in mind, however. First, release between people is categorically different from God’s forgiveness of people’s sins, and so can refer to all kinds of debts between people: money, obligations, and sins.<sup>8</sup> As Oakman helpfully points out, the two halves of the petition compare “the ‘small’ forgiveness/release practiced by Jesus’ disciples and a ‘large’ forgiveness/release that only God can wield.”<sup>9</sup> Second, within the Prayer the forgiveness petition occurs immediately after the petition for bread, which suggests a concrete reference.<sup>10</sup>

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- 1 Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 322.
  - 2 For translating as “debt” and “debtors,” see Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 309; Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) 401.
  - 3 On the Prayer in *Did.* 8, “One could hardly hope for more evidence of direct literary borrowing” (W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, 1CC [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988] 598). See also Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, 309-310.
  - 4 Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 372; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 311; Christopher M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 152; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 592-593; Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O.C. Dean (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 108. Goulder doubts that any part of the Lord’s Prayer is authentic (M.D. Goulder, “The Composition of the Lord’s Prayer,” *JTS* 14/11 [1963]), but see Goodacre’s critique (Mark S. Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels: An Examination of a New Paradigm* [JSNTS; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996] 53-55).
  - 5 Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 119.
  - 6 Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 140; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 611; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007) 250, n. 72.
  - 7 Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 311; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 611-612.
  - 8 Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 400-403.
  - 9 Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1986) 154.
  - 10 Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 254.

A few modern exegetes have proposed that Jesus was enjoining debt-forgiveness generally,<sup>11</sup> or opposing the *prosbul*.<sup>12</sup> The brevity of these proposals constrained their authors to an outline rather than a developed argument, and they have not won over the guild. In this article I provide a more detailed (and hopefully more persuasive) argument. First, I will argue that the Jesus-saying was uttered in a setting of widespread indebtedness brought about partly by the institution of the *prosbul*. I will then argue that lexically, it is likely that Jesus was referring to both debt and sin (rather than just sin), and that lexical and contextual considerations in both Matthew and Luke suggest that the redactors understood the Jesus-saying in this sense. I conclude that Jesus enjoined debt forgiveness in the forgiveness petition, and that the historical setting makes it likely that by doing so he opposed the *prosbul*.

### 1.1 Release Laws

The Torah contains a number of passages which enjoin release every seventh year (paralleling the sabbath day).<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 15 deals with the release (שמטה) of Israelites from debt (15:1-11) and slavery (15:12-18), and is related to Exod 21:2-6, 23:10-11, and Lev 25.<sup>14</sup> While there is discussion about the details of the release law in Deut 15:1-11, "Jewish exegesis and practice has always assumed that the law required complete cancellation of debts in the seventh year,"<sup>15</sup> and this seems the best reading of the text.<sup>16</sup> The Deuteronomic release laws are structurally and thematically important.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly, 11Q13 shows that the Qumran community associated the release laws with the "year of favour" in Isa 61 in eschatological expectations,<sup>18</sup>

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- 11 F. Charles Fensham, "The Legal Background of מַט. vi 12," *NovT* 4/1 (1960) 1-2; Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 253-255.
  - 12 Samuel Tobias Lachs, "On Matthew vi.12," *NovT* 17/1 (1975) 6-8; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009) 222, n. 179.
  - 13 As שבת only occurs in Lev 25, I will refer to the "release laws."
  - 14 Christopher J.H. Wright, "Sabbatical Year," *ABD* 5 (1992) 857.
  - 15 Wright, "Sabbatical Year," 858-859.
  - 16 Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 145; Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 162-166.
  - 17 Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2004) 174; Jeffries M. Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy* (The Case of Deuteronomy 15; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992) 107-113; Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 188.
  - 18 J.J.M. Roberts, "Melchizedek (11Q13 = 11QMelchizedek = 11QMelch)," in *Pesharim, Other Commentaries, and Related Documents* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 264, 267.

which is relevant because of the programmatic declaration by Jesus in Luke 4:16-19.<sup>19</sup> Herzog notes that “from the point of view of the debt codes, poverty is the result of covetous greed.”<sup>20</sup> A common theme of Jesus’ teaching was opposition to injustice, particularly mistreatment of the poor,<sup>21</sup> and to speak against violation of the debt release laws would be consistent with the dominical programme.

## 1.2 *The prosbul*

The *prosbul* allowed a lender to escape remission of a debt in a release year, and its institution is ascribed to Hillel in *m. Shebi.* 10.3.<sup>22</sup> The ascription to Hillel, which internally places the institution before the turn of the era,<sup>23</sup> ought not necessarily to be taken at face value.<sup>24</sup> But while it is impossible to be certain of the exact details of the origins of the *prosbul*, it is those details which are the subject of scholarly debate. The consensus is that the *prosbul* predates Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

## 1.3 *Observance of the Release Laws*

The whole point of the *prosbul* was to allow pious creditors to escape the year of release, and so the fact the *prosbul* was instituted shows the year of release was being observed in the Second Temple period. Ben Zion Wacholder has

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- 19 M. de Jonge and A.S. van der Woude, “11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament,” *NTS* 12 (1966) 301-326. Merrill P. Miller, “The Function of Isa 61:1-2 in 11Q Melchizedek,” *JBL* 88 (1969) 467-469.
- 20 William R. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 158.
- 21 Christopher M. Hays, *Luke’s Wealth Ethics* (WUNT 2.275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 122.
- 22 Aaron Rothkoff, “Prosbul (Heb. פרוסבול or פרוזבול),” *EncJud* 13:1182.
- 23 Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (trans. Markus Bockmuehl; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 64.
- 24 Alexander Samely, *Forms of Rabbinic Literature and Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 98.
- 25 Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 117-120; Solomon Zeitlin, “Prosbol: A Study in Tannaitic Jurisprudence,” *JQR* 37/4 (1947) 341-362; Daniel R. Schwartz, “Hillel and Scripture: From Authority to Exegesis,” in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and L. Johns Loren; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 333; David Innstone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, Vol. 1: *Prayer and Agriculture* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004) 249. See also Jacob Neusner, “From Exegesis to Fable in Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees,” *JJS* 25/2 (1974) 263-269; C. Safrai, “Sayings and Legends in the Hillel Tradition,” in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (ed. James H. Charlesworth and L. Johns Loren; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

catalogued other evidence of release year observance throughout the Second Temple period, including around the time of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> Particularly relevant is Murabba'at 18, an Aramaic loan document from the Judean desert dating from 55/56 CE.<sup>27</sup> In it, the debtor promises to repay a loan even in a release year (ושנת שמטה, recto line 6).<sup>28</sup> The document is not a *prosbul*, at least in the form extant in *m. Shebi* 10.4, as it is a contract between debtor and (impious) lender, but it shows that the year of release was observed widely enough that avoiding it required a contractual exception, and observance applied to loans as well as agriculture. The year of release was observed during Jesus' lifetime.

#### 1.4 *Indebtedness*

Indebtedness was a widespread problem that triggered popular involvement in the Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE (see *BJ* 2.427).<sup>29</sup> The main opportunity for investment had become loans which returned more than the invested capital, and the institution of the *prosbul* implies that the expectation of return motivated lenders (whereas Deut 15 enjoins lending as a generous act to the poor, not motivated by hope of return).<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the institution of the *prosbul* was originally intended to increase the supply of credit, but the "long-range effect was permanent debt."<sup>31</sup> As Douglas Oakman concludes, there was "a clear socio-economic dynamic in Palestine under the early empire—debt, concentration of land, growth of tenancy."<sup>32</sup> The province faced a crisis in 70 CE that had been developing during Jesus' lifetime, and the *prosbul* contributed to the crisis.

26 Ben Zion Wacholder, "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and Early Rabbinical Period," *HUCA* 44 (1973) 153-196. See also Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 468.

27 Pierre Benoit and Józef Tadeusz Milik, *Les Grottes De Murabba'ât*, Vol. 1 (DJD 2; Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 100-104.

28 C.f. Deut 15:9 השמטה שנת.

29 Martin Goodman, "The First Jewish Revolt: Social Conflict and the Problem of Debt," *JJS* 33/2 (1982) 417-427. Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome A.D. 66-70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 51-75. See also Gildas Hamel, "Poverty and Charity," in *Poverty and Charity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 313; Douglas E. Oakman, "Money in the Moral Universe of the New Testament," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina and Gerd Theissen; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

30 Goodman, "The First Jewish Revolt," 419; Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea*, 58.

31 Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs*, 60.

32 Oakman, *Jesus and the Economic Questions of His Day*, 77.

## 2 Lexical Issues

Not only did Jesus utter the saying in a setting of indebtedness, but the lexical evidence suggests that Jesus had debt as well as sin in mind.

### 2.1 חוב

חוב can refer to debt or to sin.<sup>33</sup> Aramaic examples come from the Elephantine papyri from the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, where חוב refers to financial liability (B1.1:15, B1.1:19, B3.5:14, B3.6:14, B3.11:10, B3.11:13, B3.12:29, B3.13:6, B4.4:15, B4.7:5).<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in the Wadi Daliyeh papyri from the 4th century BCE, חוב is used in a number of the slave sale contracts to refer to financial liability (WDSP 11.10, WDSP 6 1.10, WDSP 7 fi-6.14, WDSP 15 1.16).<sup>35</sup> A number of late first century CE documents from the Judean desert also use חוב, again only referring to debt (5/6Hev 2 r.15, 5/6Hev 2 r.39, 5/6Hev 3 r.17, 5/6Hev 3 r.44, 5/6Hev 4 r.14).<sup>36</sup> There are two uses in biblical Hebrew, the first being a straightforward reference to debt in Ezek 18:7. The second, in Dan 1:10, is a verbal use referring to general obligation rather than debt. There are no biblical uses of חוב to refer to sin.

Gary Anderson argues that there was a development of Jewish terminology for sin from the Levitical “burden” language to “debt” language.<sup>37</sup> An example can be found in Exod 34:7, where the Aramaic *Tg. Onq.* has ולחובין for the MT’s Hebrew וְחַטָּאָה.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, this gloss seems to be characteristic in the Targums.

It is not clear that this transformation had occurred as early as the first century BCE, however, as the change is primarily observable in the Targums. Even in the Targums, חוב can still refer to debt (e.g. 2 Kings 4:7), and in Ezek 18 חוב refers to debt in verse 7 and sin in verse 13. In the Qumran documents, the normal terms for sin in both Hebrew and Aramaic are עון, חטאה, and פשע (over

33 Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 140. See also Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1971) 6, n. 15; Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, חוב, HALOT 1:295. See also Willem A. VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997) 39.

34 Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, Vol. 2: *Contracts* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1989).

35 Douglas Marvin Gropp et al., *Wadi Daliyeh II: The Samaria Papyri from Wadi Daliyeh and Qumran Cave 4: Miscellanea*, Pt. 2 (DJD 28; Oxford: Clarendon, 2001).

36 Yigael Yadin et al., *The Documents From the Bar-Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabatean-Aramaic Papyri* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2002).

37 Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010).

38 Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus* (Denver: Ktav, 1990) 313.

two hundred uses), much the same as in biblical Hebrew.<sup>39</sup> The Qumran documents do use כּוּב for sin rather than debt, but only in a few places (just over twenty occurrences for כּוּב and חוּבָה).

From the evidence we have, in the first century CE כּוּב was a comprehensible but still unusual word for sin, and would not become the conventional term until later.

## 2.2 ὀφείλημα & ἀφίημι

Ὀφείλημα typically refers to debts, or obligations to other people, rather than sin (and its cognate nouns have similar senses).<sup>40</sup> Ἀφίημι can refer to legal acquittal, but there are no examples in the lexicons of ἀφίημι with ὀφείλ- as its object where sin is in view.<sup>41</sup> In fact, when the terms were used together in the papyri they referred to the release of debts.<sup>42</sup>

But the most significant observation is that it is very unusual for the New Testament to use ὀφείλημα (or its cognates) to refer to sin. Besides the forgiveness petition, the only use referring to sin is in Luke 13:4 where Jesus asks if those killed by the tower of Siloam “were owing (ὀφειλέται) more than all other people dwelling in Jerusalem”—and in this instance the “debt” of sin is owed to God, not other people. The other 43 occurrences in the New Testament all refer to debts or obligations (especially debts in the Gospels), not sins,<sup>43</sup> and other words referring to sin are used much more frequently (286 occurrences of παράπτωμα, ἁμαρτάνω, and their cognates).

Far from being a conventional way to refer to sin, the use of “debt” in relation to sin-forgiveness between people is very unusual when compared to the rest of the Gospels, the New Testament, or indeed wider Greek literature.

39 Edward M. Cook, “Is Sin in Aramaic a Commercial Term?” <http://ralphriver.blogspot.com/2010/02/is-sin-in-aramaic-commercial-term.html> (accessed January 22, 2012). In private correspondence, Prof. Cook indicated that he does not know of a published source for this point, but it is readily observable by searching the documents for each of the terms and their cognates.

40 LSJ, s.v. ὀφείλημα; Bultmann, ἀφίημι, *TDNT* 1:509-510; BDAG, s.v. ὀφείλημα. Luz arguably goes too far when he says that it means “only” money debts (*Matthew* 1-7, 311); so also Horsley (*Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, 252-253), as obligations included those things “which one has not, but ought to have, done,” and “the due services of the gods” (LSJ, s.v. ὀφείλημα).

41 LSJ, s.v. ἀφίημι; BDAG, s.v. ἀφίημι.

42 Giovanni Battista Bazzana, “*Basileia* and Debt Relief: The Forgiveness of Debts in the Lord’s Prayer in the Light of Documentary Papyri,” *CBQ* 73 (2011) 511-525.

43 On Luke 13:4 see Hauck, ὀφείλω, *TDNT* 5:562-563.

### 3 The Petition in Matt 6:12

The immediate context in the Sermon suggests the Matthean redactor understood Jesus to have debt in view here, as well as sin. The Sermon enjoins debt-forgiveness before and after the Prayer. In 5:42 Jesus has already enjoined generous lending, in a reference back to the ideal in Deut 15:10.<sup>44</sup> Later in the Sermon, 6:21 (with its reference to the heart) and 6:23 (with its reference to the evil eye in connection with money) provide verbal links to Deut 15:9.<sup>45</sup> In other words, when Jesus enjoins the right use of money in 6:19-24, he does so by pointing back to the exemplary behaviour of Deut 15.

This interpretation of the forgiveness petition finds further support in two places: firstly, by comparing the petition with the explanatory statement of verses 14-15; and secondly, by considering the parabolic explanation in Matt 18.

#### 3.1 *The Clarifying Statement*

The clarifying statement in 6:14-15 is sometimes seen as evidence of the petition's purely metaphorical use of debt language.<sup>46</sup> I propose that the opposite is the case, regardless of whether the statement is redactional or reflects an authentic saying. I will consider each case separately.

Assume for the moment that verses 14-15 are attributable to Matthean redaction<sup>47</sup> (or non-authentic Matthean source material).<sup>48</sup> In this case, "debt" in the forgiveness petition was not immediately comprehensible to at least some of the writer's intended audience—otherwise there would be no need for the clarifying statement in verses 14-15. The clarifying statement demonstrates an awareness of the risk that some intended readers would not understand "sin" to be included in the petition's condition. Now, if sin-forgiveness was all the petition enjoined, that confusion could have been avoided by the simple expedient of substituting *παραπτώματα* for *ὀφειλήματα* in the forgiveness petition.<sup>49</sup> But MtR chose not to make the obvious substitution, showing that retaining "debt" was a deliberate choice. As I showed earlier, "debt" was a very unusual

44 Sjef van Tilborg, *The Sermon on the Mount As an Ideological Intervention: A Reconstruction of Meaning* (Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1986) 122.

45 Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 640.

46 France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 250.

47 Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 616.

48 Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 415.

49 If the petition in the Prayer and the text of verses 14-15 were already connected in the tradition or liturgical usage, then MtR would simply be preserving an existing connection. The same argument applies, but to the originator of the traditional connection between the two statements.

way of referring to sin, and so MtR had to add the clarifying statement of verses 14-15 to ensure that all the intended readers would understand that “debt” in the Prayer includes sin (as well as money debts).

But what if we assume that the clarifying statement in verses 14-15 is an authentic Jesus-saying?<sup>50</sup> In that case, we have a similar situation, but with Jesus as the originator of both statements. Παράπτωμα, which Matthew only uses in these two verses, is “a violation of moral standards.”<sup>51</sup> It seems unlikely that it could be an alternate gloss for בּוֹחַ, for which ὀφείλημα is both the obvious gloss and from a set of cognates used elsewhere. If we concede that Matthew has *some* reason for using παράπτωμα rather than ὀφείλημα, then the most likely reason is to reflect a different underlying Aramaic word, and the contrasting terms have a dominical origin. The question then is whether verse 12 and verses 14-15 appear together because Jesus placed them together in the Sermon, or because MtR placed them together redactionally. In either case, the potential confusion results from the use of “debt” in the Prayer, and could have been avoided by Jesus using “sin” in the Prayer itself. The fact that he did not, and that MtR then felt it necessary to preserve the ambiguous debt terminology in Greek, suggests that “debt” in the Prayer is the result of a meaningful choice, rather than an incidental reflection of an Aramaic idiom.

### 3.2 Parabolic Illustration

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Slave in Matt 18:23-35, Jesus draws a hyperbolic comparison between the debt incurred by people to God through their sins, and (comparatively) trivial human debts.<sup>52</sup> The exemplary behaviour in this parable serves as an example of the kind of forgiveness Jesus enjoined, because forgiving debts is a dramatic illustration of divine sin forgiveness. While the point of the parable is to enjoin mutual sin forgiveness, its rhetorical point depends on recognition of debt forgiveness as the paradigmatic behaviour displayed by those forgiven by God.<sup>53</sup>

50 Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 214; tentatively, Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 327.

51 BDAG, s.v. παράπτωμα. Παράπτωμα occurs only ten times in the LXX, mostly used to gloss עֲשָׂה or עוֹל, versus 425 uses of ἁμαρτία.

52 G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 115; Goodacre, *Goulder and the Gospels*, 200. The parable is “almost universally reckoned an authentic parable of Jesus” (W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8-18: A Commentary* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991] 794); Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 610; Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 120-121; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 249.

53 Ernst Fuchs, “The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant,” *Studia Evangelica* 1 (1958).

It seems difficult to imagine that any sensitive person who hoped for God's eschatological forgiveness,<sup>54</sup> but had obtained a *prosbul* to compel repayment from a compatriot, could have listened to this parable with equanimity.

#### 4 The Petition in Luke 11:4

Luke's version of the petition has a slight difference in vocabulary from Matthew's, using ἀμαρτίας in the first half of the petition. I propose that Luke retains "debt" (ὀφείλοντι) in the second half of the petition to retain Jesus' injunction to forgive debts, as well as sins. There seems little doubt among commentators that Luke's redactional concerns have led him to use ἀμαρτίας in the first clause. This is consistent with Luke's terminological fondness for sin forgiveness,<sup>55</sup> and has the additional advantage of making an idiomatically Jewish expression "more intelligible for Gentile Christian readers."<sup>56</sup>

With that context in mind, it is noticeable that Luke does not make a similar change to the second clause. As we have already established, the second clause would have had financial connotations to most readers.<sup>57</sup> One possibility is redactional fatigue, but this seems unlikely in this instance when the first change occurred only seven words earlier.<sup>58</sup>

My opinion is that a more credible reason for Luke's redaction is that he is preserving an important feature of this Jesus-saying. Luke appears willing to run the risk that Gentile readers see only debt forgiveness and miss the broader meaning of sin forgiveness. In the first clause, nothing was lost through the substitution of "sin" for "debt," but had he made the same substitution in the second clause he would have excluded debt forgiveness.

Of course, just as in Luke's thematic concern for the materially and spiritually poor, there is a broader meaning than mere debt forgiveness in his version of the forgiveness petition, related as it clearly is to divine sin forgiveness. As Hays points out, "Luke engages Isaiah's hope for redemption in relation to *both* material and spiritual dimensions."<sup>59</sup> But as Deuteronomy urges generous debt

54 Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, 803; D.A. Carson, "The ΟΜΟΙΟΣ Word-Group As Introduction to Some Matthean Parables," *NTS* 31/2 (1985) 277-282.

55 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1979) 223.

56 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) 906.

57 Note too that both other uses in Luke's Gospel of ἀφήμι as "forgive" without ἀμαρτία or a cognate as its object (Luke 23:24a, 12:10) refer to divine forgiveness of sinful acts.

58 There is always the possibility (however unlikely), if Luke and Matthew are referring to separate authentic sayings, that the Aramaic underlying each source might be different. In that case the variation would be dominical rather than redactional.

59 Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 111.

forgiveness between “brothers” in Israel, Jesus urges debt forgiveness between his followers, who are fictive kin.<sup>60</sup>

#### 4.1 *Debt Forgiveness in Luke*

In his redactional decision, Luke is consistent with his presentation of Jesus' other enjoinders to forgive debts. The declaration Jesus makes in Luke 4:18-21 highlights “release” as a central theme of the dominical programme in Luke's narrative, which includes debt cancellation,<sup>61</sup> and so it should come as no surprise to see release from both sin and debt occur in Luke's dominical Prayer.

Jesus explicitly enjoins debt forgiveness in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (6:34-35 and 6:37), in a list of injunctions which is thematically dominated by reciprocal behaviour.<sup>62</sup> In a brief parable (7:41-43), debt remission is used to illustrate divine forgiveness (in this case, exercised by Jesus himself in verse 48), and the parable functions persuasively because debt remission is recognisably righteous behaviour.

Finally, in the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16, Jesus portrays debt forgiveness as an exemplary use of money resulting in eschatological reward.<sup>63</sup> In the parable, the steward is commended because he restores the master's honour,<sup>64</sup> and the fact that this is at the master's financial expense only adds to the theological elegance of the parable. What is significant for us is that debt forgiveness in particular is commended as the paradigmatic use of money, not merely general benevolence.<sup>65</sup>

What is more, the response of the Pharisees—“lovers of money” (Luke 16:14)<sup>66</sup> who were moved to ridicule Jesus after this parable—and the highlighting of the law by Jesus in the following verses (16:16-17)<sup>67</sup> both suggest the *prosbul* as the basis of their disagreement, as the *prosbul* was the Pharisaic means of avoiding the debt release laws.

60 Joel B. Green, *Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 443.

61 Green, *Luke*, 212.

62 Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 114-115; Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, 637.

63 Φρονίμως in Luke is used for those who respond to the eschatological challenge appropriately (Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1102).

64 John S. Kloppenborg, “The Dishonoured Master (Luke 16, 1-8A),” *Biblica* 70/4 (1989) 474-495; David Landry and Ben May, “Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8A),” *JBL* 119/2 (2000) 287-309.

65 Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 143-146.

66 Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 158. See also Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 284, 296.

67 Luke's citations of the Law and the Prophets tend to give prominence to passages enjoining love of others, care for the poor through sharing possessions and refraining from exploitation, and the release laws (Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, 156-158).

## 5 Conclusion

The value of the concrete act of forgiving debts enjoined by Jesus was not only that debt-forgiveness provided practical care for the poor, but that such acts were graphic illustrations of the greater forgiveness of God. The Parable of the Unforgiving Slave uses this contrast to persuasive effect.

As I have examined the forgiveness petition in the Prayer, I have primarily considered the question of whether Jesus was enjoining debt-forgiveness. That point is, I believe, established. The more difficult question to answer is whether Jesus opposed the *prosbul*, as the Gospel writers do not record Jesus mentioning the *prosbul*.

The social setting of widespread indebtedness was only possible in Jewish society because of the Pharisaic innovation of the *prosbul*. The *prosbul* was the only way pious contemporaries could avoid the Torah's requirement to forgive debts periodically. When Jesus enjoined debt forgiveness, he urged precisely the behaviour that the Torah commanded and that the *prosbul* made unnecessary. The point can hardly have escaped his hearers.

What is more, the forgiveness petition made mutual debt-forgiveness (and sin-forgiveness) a condition of divine forgiveness, elevating debt-forgiveness to a position of even greater importance than it had within the Torah. To contemporary hearers, the inclusion of debt-forgiveness in the only condition of Jesus' model prayer would surely have excluded those who availed themselves of the *prosbul* from praying the Prayer.

In conclusion it is worth noting that both Origen (*De Dominica Oratione* 28.2) and Gregory of Nyssa (*De Oratione Dominica* 5) read the petition as enjoining the forgiveness of debts as well as sins.<sup>68</sup> In my view, Gregory of Nyssa correctly understood the petition:

If you remit the material debt, the bonds of your soul will also be loosened; if you pardon, you will be pardoned. You must be your own judge, your own lawgiver.

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68 Augustine argues that someone who prays the petition is "admonished about forgiving a money debt" (*De Sermone Domini in Monte* 2.8.28). Cyprian (*De Dominica Oratione* 22) and Tertullian (*De Dominica Oratione* 7) both took the petition to refer solely to sins.