Divine and Human Forgiveness: A Response to Tobias Hägerland

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Two studies of forgiveness in the Jesus tradition have appeared recently, independent of each other. Those two studies are Tobias Hägerland's *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins* and my own *God's Equal*.[1] Our conclusions are to some extent corroborating each other, and to some extent diverging and suggesting further research and dialogue.

In terms of agreement, both studies conclude that the historical Jesus probably announced the forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:5 par.; Luke 7:48). Both studies appeal to the criterion of dissimilarity, as it is God, not Jesus, who forgives sins in the earliest Christian tradition.[2]

The most significant disagreement between our studies concerns the understanding of Jesus' identity, but even on this score there is significant agreement. Hägerland and I agree that the evangelists have portrayed Jesus as a character that took it upon himself to do what only God could do: forgive sins by his own authority (cf. Exod 34:7; Isa 43:25; 44:22; 55:7; Ps 103:3; 130:4).

However, Hägerland and I reach different conclusions regarding the historical Jesus. Whereas I believe the picture in the Gospels adequately reflects the self-understanding of the historical Jesus, Hägerland concludes that the picture of Jesus has changed significantly in the course of tradition. While the evangelists present Jesus as encroaching upon God's prerogative to forgive sins, the underlying historical reality is a Jesus that

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[1] Tobias Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission*, SNTSMS 150 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Sigurd Grindheim, *God's Equal: What Can We Know About Jesus' Self-Understanding?* LNTS 446 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 60–76. See also the debate between Hägerland and Daniel Johansson in Daniel Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?' Human and Angelic Agents, and Divine Forgiveness in Early Judaism," *JSNT* 33 (2011): 351–74 and Tobias Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness in Josephus and Mark," *SEÅ* 79 (2014): 125–39.

[2] Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 110–13; Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 61–64.

acted as the eschatological prophet. His forgiveness should be seen in analogy with the forgiveness proclaimed by Israel's prophets.[3]

In this article, I will argue that the evidence lends greater support to my explanatory model than it does to Hägerland's.

Hägerland's case depends on two crucial arguments. The first is that the account in Mark 2:1–12 is not authentic in its entirety. Instead, he contends that an authentic account of forgiveness (2:1–5, 11–12) has been combined with an inauthentic blasphemy charge attributed to the scribes (2:6–7) and with an inauthentic reference to the healing of the paralytic as legitimating Jesus' forgiveness (Mark 2:8–10). The second major argument is that, in Second Temple Judaism, prophets were thought to be able to pronounce forgiveness on behalf of God. In the following, I will look at these arguments, beginning with the view of forgiveness in Second Temple Judaism and continuing with the questions of authenticity and the integrity of Mark 2:1–12.

Prophetic Forgiveness

In the article "Prophetic Forgiveness in Josephus and Mark," Hägerland further develops his understanding of the nature of Jesus' forgiveness. Applying a distinction between primary and secondary causes, he explains that God remains the primary cause of forgiveness, but that human beings may serve as the secondary cause. That God is the one who forgives sins may therefore not rule out the possibility that human beings also forgive sins, as the secondary cause. The idea is illustrated by the case of blessings. Human beings frequently bless others with the blessing of God, or pray that God's blessing may befall them (Gen 48:15–16; 49:25–28; Num 6:23–27; 22:6, 12; 23:11–12, 20). In these instances, God is the primary cause of blessing, and human beings are the secondary cause.[4]

As Hägerland readily concedes, in most of his examples of prophetic forgiveness, the prophet's role in the act of forgiveness is not made explicit. However, there are several clear examples which show that God forgives sins, and the prophet announces what God has done.[5] In Isa 33:24, the prophet proclaims that "the people who live [in Zion] will be forgiven their iniquity," and in Isa 40:2 LXX, he calls upon the priests to

[3] Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 214; Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 75–76.
[4] Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 127–28.
[5] The following relies on Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 142–66.

proclaim forgiveness: "[o] priests, speak to the heart of Ierousalem; comfort her, because her humiliation has been fulfilled, her sin has been done away with, because she has received from the Lord's hand double that of her sins."

The pattern is the same in the writings from Second Temple Judaism. According to LAB 30:7, Deborah assured the Israelites that "the Lord will take pity on you today." Josephus reports several similar assurances. Moses "told them that he had come to bring them from God deliverance from their present straits" (*Ant.* 3.24). Nathan delivered a prophecy to inform king David that "God took pity on him and was reconciled to him. And He promised to preserve both his life and his kingdom" (*Ant*. 7.153). During the reign of Rehoboam, God "said to the prophet that He would not destroy them but would, nevertheless, make them subject to the Egyptians, in order that they might learn which was the easier task, whether to serve man or God" (*Ant*. 8.257).

In all of these examples, it is debatable whether the prophets may be described as the cause of forgiveness at all. Their role may be better accounted for as that of announcing God's forgiveness, not causing it.

As Hägerland has shown, however, there is one example that stands out: Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* 6.92. The prophet Samuel is here involved in the forgiveness of the people. Most translations render the relevant sentence in such a way that God is the subject of the forgiveness: "[the people] implored the prophet, as a kind and gentle father, to render God gracious to them that He might forgive this sin (τὸν θεὸν αὐτοῖς εὐμενῆ καταστῆσαι καὶ ταύτην ἀφεῖναι τὴν ἁμαρτίαν)."[6] As Hägerland has demonstrated, however, the subject of forgiveness is more likely to be the prophet, Samuel: "they began to implore the prophet as a mild and gentle father, to make God benevolent towards them and to forgive this sin." It is unlikely that the two infinitives connected with καί (καταστῆσαι and ἀφεῖναι) should have two different subjects. The subject of the first infinitive is indisputably the prophet Samuel, and the subject of the second infinitive should be taken to be Samuel as well.[7]

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[6] Quotation from Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities Books V–VIII*, vol. 5 of *Josephus*, trans. Ralph Marcus and H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 213.

[7] For a more thorough discussion, see Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 147–48; Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 130–37; contra Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins?'," 360–63.

The context in Josephus's *Antiquities* still makes it clear that Samuel's forgiveness is secondary to the forgiveness of God. He offers forgiveness on the basis of his prayers to God, as he would "beseech God to pardon them in this thing and would withal move Him thereto" (*Ant*. 6.93). Nevertheless, Samuel is attributed with an active role in the forgiveness of the people's sins, and the instance serves as an example in which Hägerland's explanatory model is apt: God is the primary cause of forgiveness and Samuel is the secondary cause.

In addition to *Ant*. 6.92, Hägerland also points to the Prayer of Nabonidus (4Q242), in which the "exorcist" or "diviner" (probably Daniel) may be attributed with the forgiveness of sins. In García Martínez's translation, line 4 of fragments 1–3 reads: "an exorcist forgave my sin." The reading is uncertain, as the manuscript is corrupt, and it is not clear whether the forgiveness is attributed to God or to the exorcist.[8] In any case, the prayer does not refer to forgiveness of sins in the strict sense. The prayer is about healing, and line 4 describes the healing. As sickness was generally viewed as the consequence of sin, the term חטא ("sin") is used metonymously with reference to Nabonidus's sickness.[9] The point is that Nabonidus's sickness left him.

With the exception of this last example, all the instances of prophetic forgiveness occur in a context that leaves no doubt as to who offers forgiveness. God is the ultimate source of forgiveness. In most cases, the prophet is merely making known what God has done. Josephus ties Samuel more closely to the act of forgiveness, but also he leaves no doubt that God is the one who forgives. The only possible example of forgiveness without an explicit reference to God's forgiveness is found in the Prayer of Nabonidus (4Q242), in which the reading is in doubt and in which we do not have the full context because of the corruption of the manuscript. The prayer also does not refer to forgiveness specifically, but to healing, described metonymously as forgiveness.

These examples are therefore not a good model for the understanding of Jesus' forgiveness as it is described in Mark 2:1–12. Regarding the nature of this account as it has been preserved in Mark's Gospel, Hägerland concedes that Jesus is not presented as the secondary cause of for-

[8] Hägerland argues well for the latter interpretation (*Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 156–57).
[9] Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 72–73.

giveness, but the primary cause.[10] Jesus does not pray to God that he may forgive the sins of the paralytic, and he does not refer to God as the one whose forgiveness he announces. The scribes' reaction, that Jesus was blaspheming, shows that he was understood to offer forgiveness autonomously, an understanding Jesus himself confirms. When his authority is challenged, he refers back to himself and his own authority: "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10). To demonstrate the validity of his claim, he performs a healing of the paralytic (2:11–12).

Authenticity of the Accompanying Healing Miracle

However, these elements of the tradition cannot be established with the same level of certainty as the fact that Jesus offered forgiveness. Hägerland maintains that Jesus' reference to his healing as legitimating his absolution (Mark 2:10–11) must be inauthentic, as it conflicts with Jesus' refusal to provide self-legitimizing signs (Mark 8:11–12; Q 11:16, 29).[11]

I beg to differ with Hägerland in this assessment. The saying in which Jesus refuses to provide signs cannot bear the weight that Hägerland puts on it. In the Markan version, Jesus exclaims: "[w]hy does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation" (Mark 8:12). As Jeffrey Gibson has demonstrated, the sign in question is of a particular nature. It is qualified as a sign "from heaven" (8:11), it is expected by "this generation," and it is a sign that "will be given." All these qualifiers identify the sign as an apocalyptic, salvific intervention from heaven, such as the exodus from Egypt, the kind of sign that the end-time false messiahs would provide (Mark 13:22) and that Jesus' opponents were daring him to perform when he was on the cross (Mark 15:28–32). Gibson concludes that Jesus' refusal is not a refusal to perform any self-authenticating sign at all. It is a refusal to bring salvation without the cross.[12]

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[10] Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 137; cf. Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 166.

[11] Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 214–15, 236–41; Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 138–39.

[12] Jeffrey B. Gibson, "Jesus' Refusal to Produce a 'Sign' (Mk 8.11–13)," *JSNT* 38 (1990): 37–66, here 42–56. For a similar interpretation of the "sign from heaven," see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 580; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 348.

Gibson's arguments are based on the literary context in Mark's Gospel, and his conclusions cannot be applied directly to the historical Jesus.[13] Mark's understanding of the saying is not unique to him, however. The saying is also found in the double tradition, in a quite different form. Jesus' refusal is there qualified by an exception: "[t]his generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Luke 11:29; cf. Matt 12:39, which is more explicit in its reference to the resurrection). This version is consistent with the interpretation that the sign in question is an apocalyptic intervention and that Jesus is not categorically opposed to the provision of signs. An apocalyptic intervention will be provided, but not in the way that his opponents require.

In the form in which this saying has survived, it cannot be understood as a wholesale rejection of self-validating signs. It is also unlikely that the historical Jesus would have intended the saying in such a comprehensive way. Such an understanding of Jesus' words would conflict with what is otherwise known about the historical Jesus.

When John the Baptist was in prison, the double tradition reports that he sent messengers to Jesus to inquire about his identity. The messengers were sent to ask: "[a]re you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:19 par.). Although John does not explicitly request a sign, Jesus responds by pointing to his works: "[g]o and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Luke 7:22–23 par.). The authenticity of this account in its broad outline is

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Other interpreters take the qualifier "from heaven" as a circumlocution for God and see the request for a sign as an attempt to dare God to intervene (Joachim Gnilka, *Das Markusevangelium*, vol. 1, EKKNT 2/1 [Zurich: Benziger, 1978], 306–7; Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34A [Dallas: Word, 1989], 413–14). Joel Marcus reads the passage against the background of Israel's testing of God in the wilderness (Exod 16:1–17:7) and finds that Mark reveals the demonic nature of the Pharisees' request. He concludes that the request for signs is not wrong, but that it is wrong for the Pharisees, who belong to "this generation," to request them (*Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 504; similarly, R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 312).

[13] The historicity of the saying in Mark 8:12 is widely granted (e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 2d ed., FRLANT 29 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931], 124). The Jesus seminar voted the saying gray, however (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993], 71–73).

widely accepted, as it is unlikely that the picture of a doubting John the Baptist could be the creation of the early church.[14] If so, it shows that Jesus saw his own signs as the decisive legitimation of his identity.

Another example is found in the Beelzebul-saying, also frequently assumed to be authentic.[15] In response to the challenge that his exorcisms are performed by the power of Beelzebul, Jesus counters: "[b]ut if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20 par.). The logic of this saying is that Jesus' signs, in this case his exorcisms, provide the decisive demonstration that he is bringing the kingdom of God.

While these examples do not show that Jesus performed miracles for the sole purpose of confirming his identity or the validity of his words, they do show that Jesus viewed his own miracles as demonstrating the veracity of his most fundamental claims. The only thing that is different in the story of the paralytic is that Jesus makes this pronunciation before he performs the miracle, not afterwards. The reference to the miracle as self-validating is fully consistent with other reliable information about the historical Jesus. That Jesus refers to signs that demonstrate the validity of his forgiveness is also attested elsewhere. This attestation is found in the only other forgiveness story in the Synoptic tradition, the story of the sinful woman in Simon's house. This story is more difficult to assess historically, but, for our present purposes, it should be noted that Jesus points to evidence that his forgiveness is valid. In this case, the evidence is the devotion that the woman shows to Jesus (Luke 7:47).[16]

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[14] In his paper to the Jesus seminar, Walter Wink argued for the highest probability rating, red, of Matt 11:5–6 par. He contends that the church would not have created a story about a doubting John the Baptist who remains unconvinced by Jesus' reply. He also finds it unlikely that the church would have portrayed Jesus as ambiguous and non-committal when asked whether he was the Messiah ("Jesus' Reply to John: Matt 11:2–6/Luke 7:18–23," *Forum* 5.1 [1989]: 121–28, here 124–27). For a discussion of the saying's authenticity with further references, see Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 43–48.

[15] According to Davies and Allison, the authenticity of Matt 12:28 "would seem to be one of the assured results of modern criticism" (*Matthew*, 2:339). For a thorough discussion with bibliographic references, see Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 23–26.

[16] I presuppose the interpretation that sees the woman's love as evidence of her forgiveness, not the cause of it. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 313; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX): Introduction, Translation and Notes*, AB 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 692; C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM, 1990), 364; John J. Kilgallen, "Forgiveness of Sins (Luke 7:36–50)," *NovT* 40 (1998): 105–16; Ellen J. Christiansen, "Sinner According to Words of the Law, Righteous by Works of Love," in

It is therefore intrinsically unlikely that the saying in Mark 8:12 should contradict this information and constitute an instance in which Jesus refused to perform any kind of self-legitimating miracle. The interpretation of the saying that is attested in the earliest sources, Mark's Gospel as well as the double tradition, also goes in a different direction: what Jesus refuses to provide is a specific kind of miracle. There is no compelling reason, therefore, to doubt that Jesus would have healed the paralytic in order to demonstrate the validity of his forgiveness.

Authenticity of the Blasphemy Charge

With respect to the blasphemy charge, Hägerland correctly points out that the historicity of this accusation is difficult to assess.[17] According to Mark's narrative, the charge was unstated; the teachers were only thinking it (Mark 2:6–7). The reliability of such information is naturally in doubt.[18]

However, one creates more problems than one solves if one deems this charge to be fictional. Such a conclusion raises the question of the origin of the charge. Is it likely that the early Christians would have invented a charge of blasphemy against the originator of their movement? One might perhaps suggest that the early Christians were being accused of blasphemy, and that the evangelist wanted to show that Christians facing such charges were simply following in the footsteps of their master. This is a plausible explanation, but, to my knowledge, there is no clear evidence that the early Christians were confronted with such accusations.[19]

Jesus and Paul: Global Perspectives in Honor of James D. G. Dunn for His 70th Birthday, ed. B. J. Oropeza, C. K. Robertson, and Douglas C. Mohrmann, LNTS 414 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 35–45, here 45; John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 179–80; contra Heinz Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, vol. 1, HTKNT 3/1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 430, 437; Michael Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium*, HNT 5 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 296.

[17] Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 138–39.

[18] Similarly, E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM, 1990), 96.

[19] According to Acts 6:11, Stephen was accused of speaking "blasphemous words against Moses and God." It is not at all clear, however, that the term βλάσφημα is here intended in its technical, legal sense (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 31 [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 359). In any case, the accusation concerns Stephen's words against the temple and the law (Acts 6:13–14), not his claims regarding Jesus.

Hägerland suggests that Mark may have invented the charge to serve his caricature of the scribes, but Mark's portrait of the scribes is not one-sidedly negative.[20] The scribe that questions Jesus about the greatest commandment in the law in Mark 12:28–34 is a rather positive character who recognizes the wisdom of Jesus' answer. In any case, if Mark were motivated by a desire to show that the scribes were evil, a more natural approach might be to attribute evil motives to them (cf. Mark 12:38–40), rather than to invent plausible accusations against Jesus.

Hägerland also argues that the blasphemy charge (Mark 2:7) serves Mark's literary purposes, as it foreshadows the trial (Mark 14:64).[21] There is indeed a striking link between Mark 2:1–12 and the trial narrative in 14:53–65, as both passages connect the Son of Man title with the accusation of blasphemy (2:7, 10 and 14:62, 63). But it is unlikely that the story of the paralytic has been shaped specifically in order to anticipate the trial narrative. Jesus' forgiveness, crucial to Mark 2:1–12, plays no role in 14:53–65. In Mark 14:62–63, Jesus' combination of Dan 7:13 and Ps 110:1 provokes the blasphemy charge, but neither of these passages is being clearly alluded to in Mark 2:1–12.

In Hägerland's judgment, Jesus would not have been understood as encroaching upon the prerogatives of God as long as his forgiveness could have been understood in a less offensive way: Jesus acted as a prophet.[22] As I have argued above, however, prophetic forgiveness presupposes that God is declared as the one who ultimately offers forgiveness. There is no hint of that in Mark 2:5.[23]

Hägerland also points to the difference between the scribes' stern reaction and the less hostile reaction to Jesus' forgiveness in Luke 7:49 ("Who

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[20] Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 138.

[21] Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 138; similarly, Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 61.

[22] Hägerland, "Prophetic Forgiveness," 138.

[23] Many scholars appeal to the so-called "divine passive" in Mark 2:5, to claim that Jesus was merely announcing God's forgiveness (e.g., Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], 527; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 787; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 185; similarly, John P. Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, vol. 2 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, ABRL [New York: Doubleday, 1994], 331.) It has to be demonstrated, however, that God is the implied agent of the forgiveness, and there is nothing in the context that would indicate that he is. Hägerland is open to the possibility that the saying should be understood as such a "divine passive," but this concept is not a necessary element of his argument (*Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 164–65).

is this who even forgives sins?”).[24] However, one should not necessarily expect the same reaction when the audience is more positively disposed towards Jesus. In the literary context, Simon is described as having invited Jesus to his home (Luke 7:36) and was entertaining the idea that Jesus might be a prophet (Luke 7:39). This last observation also creates additional challenges for Hägerland’s interpretation. The narrative raises the question of Jesus’ possible prophetic identity, but ends with a note that people were at a loss to understand his authority (Luke 7:49), implying the inadequacy of the prophetic category.

On the other hand, even if the narrative in Mark 2:1–12 is a stylized account, the blasphemy charge may very well have its origin in actual accusations that were made against Jesus. The charge fits the Jewish environment of the historical Jesus. Whereas Mishnah Sanhedrin specifically limits blasphemy to pronunciation of the divine name (7:5), first century sources attest to a wider definition. Philo considered it to be blasphemous to claim for oneself the prerogatives of God (*Somn.* 2.130–131; cf. *Decal.* 63). The accusation against Jesus is understandable in this setting.[25] In contrast, in the Gentile setting of Mark’s Gospel, the accusation would be less natural. In this context, both Jews and Christians were accused of being atheists, as they refused to participate in the worship of the gods (Josephus *C. Ap*. 2.148; Mart. Pol. 9.2; Justin *Apol*. 1.6).

If the blasphemy charge at Jesus’ trial is authentic or goes back to authentic accusations that were made against Jesus, the criterion of coherence speaks in favor of the authenticity of the charge reflected in Mark 2:7 as well. The blasphemy charge in Mark 14:64 is likely tied to Jesus’ claim to return as the eschatological judge.[26] Such a claim is closely related to

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[24] Hägerland, “Prophetic Forgiveness,” 138.

[25] While she does not address the question of historicity directly, Adela Yarbro Collins observes that the blasphemy charge is consistent with likely responses to Jesus’ announcement of forgiveness, as it would have been viewed as impinging on God’s unique authority (“The Charge of Blasphemy in Mark 14.64,” *JSNT* 26 [2004]: 379–401, here 397). Like Hägerland, Sanders understands Jesus’ forgiveness as proclamation of God’s forgiveness. He still finds the blasphemy charge to be possible, although he considers the case for blasphemy to be “extremely weak” (*Jewish Law*, 63).

[26] For the authenticity of the blasphemy charge, see Darrell Bock (*Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus: A Philological-Historical Study of the Key Jewish Themes Impacting Mark 14:61–64*, WUNT II 106 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998]; “Blasphemy and the Jewish Examination of Jesus,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, WUNT 247 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 589–

the claim to forgive sins, as forgiveness is an anticipation of the eschatological judgment.

The explanation that Jesus' act of forgiveness was awarded new significance in the course of Christian tradition also has some inherent difficulties. If, as Hägerland maintains, Jesus did pronounce forgiveness in a different sense than what is presupposed in the Gospel narrative, one must answer the question why his action was interpreted differently in the Christian tradition. A possible answer is that the early church wished to heighten the christological implications of the story.[27] However, this is not an explanation that coheres very well with what is known about the views of forgiveness in the early church. There is very little evidence that the first Christians even saw Jesus in the role of forgiving sins, much less that they invested his forgiveness with new meaning. Forgiveness of sins was still seen as God's prerogative. Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray to the Father for forgiveness (Matt 6:12 par.; cf. Matt 6:14–15; 18:35; Mark 11:25; Luke 23:34). When Jesus was associated with forgiveness, the typical expression was that forgiveness is acquired in Jesus' name (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 10:43; 1 John 2:12; cf. Acts 13:38), or, in Pauline terminology, "in Christ" (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14). In the undisputed Pauline epistles, there is only one reference to forgiveness of sins, namely the quotation from Psalm 32:1–2 in Rom 4:7–8. Paul made clear that the agent of forgiveness is God (Rom 4:6). This is also the norm in the later writings, whenever the agent of forgiveness is made explicit (Acts 8:22; Col 2:13; 1 John 1:9). Outside of the Gospels, only Jas 5:15 in the NT possibly describes Jesus as the agent of forgiveness (the referent of "Lord" may be either God or Jesus). In other words, there is no identifiable tendency in the early church to heighten the significance of Jesus as the one who forgave sins. If the tradition behind Mark 2:1–12 par. was motivated by such a tendency, that would have been a unique instance, as far as the available evidence goes.

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667), who understands the charge as being motivated by Jesus' words about himself as the eschatological judge.

[27] Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1933), 63.

The Integrity of Mark 2:1–12

The more conventional arguments against the integrity of Mark 2:1–12 par. are made on form-critical grounds. The passage is seen as a combination of a miracle story and a controversy story.[28] Hägerland notes that the scribes appear abruptly in verse 6.[29] In other controversy stories, the scribes are introduced at the very beginning. However, the late appearance of the scribes is characteristic of this section of Mark's Gospel (2:1–3:6), a unit that betrays a very careful compositional structure.[30] In these five pericopes, Jesus' opponents react to Jesus' actions. In 2:6, the scribes react to his forgiveness; in 2:16, the scribes and the Pharisees react to his eating with sinners and tax collectors; in 2:18, John's disciples and the Pharisees react to the fact that Jesus' disciples do not fast (although this pericope breaks with the pattern in that the narrator introduces the opponents first); in 2:24, the Pharisees react to the disciples' plucking grain on the Sabbath; in 3:2, "they" were alerted by the presence of a man with a

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[28] See, e.g., Bultmann, *Geschichte*, 12; Ingrid Maisch, *Die Heilung des Gelähmten: Eine exegetisch-traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Mk 2,1–12*, SBS 52 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1972), 29–39; Hans-Josef Klauck, "Die Frage der Sündenvergebung in der Perikope von der Heilung des Gelähmten (Mk 2,1–12 parr.)," *BZ* 25 (1981): 223–48, here 225–36. For a refutation of the various form-critical hypotheses regarding this passage, see also Christian Paul Ceroke, "Is Mk 2:10 a Saying of Jesus?" *CBQ* 22 (1960): 369–90; Volker Hampel, *Menschensohn und historischer Jesus: Ein Rätselwort als Schlüssel zum messianischen Selbstverständnis Jesu* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990), 189–97.

[29] Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*, 232.

[30] The individual pericopes in this section are connected in a more sophisticated way than what is otherwise the case in Mark's Gospel. They all concern the conflict between Jesus and his opponents, a conflict that intensifies from an unspoken accusation of blasphemy (2:7) to an active conspiracy to have him killed (3:6). There are only two stories in this section that involve healing (2:1–12 and 3:1–6), and they function as bookends. The first two units (2:1–12 and 2:13–17) are linked together by the theme of sin and forgiveness, and the last two (2:23–28 and 3:1–6) by the theme of the Sabbath. The theme of eating unites all the pericopes except the first and the last (2:13–17, 18–22, and 23–28). Many scholars attribute the composition to a pre-Markan source (following Martin Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche: Ein Beitrag zur Formengeschichte des Urchristentums* [Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1921], 5). For the pre-Markan unit comprising 2:1–28, see Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, *Ältere Sammlungen im Markusevangelium*, SNTU 8 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 86–89. Others have argued that Mark himself is responsible for the composition (Joanna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6*, SBLDS 480 [Chico: Scholars Press, 1979], 181–97; Wolfgang Weiss, *'Eine neue Lehre in Vollmacht': Die Streit- und Schulgespräche des Markus-Evangeliums*, BZNW 52 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989], 18–31).

withered hand in Jesus' vicinity. These features break with the normal pattern of the other Markan controversy stories, but the best explanation for this anomaly is that it is characteristic of the story-telling in Mark 2:1–3:6.

Several scholars also appeal to the alleged differences between the meaning of the forgiveness saying in 2:5 and the one in 2:10, and cite these differences as an argument that 2:1–12 is a composite story. They maintain that Jesus is merely announcing God's forgiveness in 2:5, whereas he is claiming to forgive on his own authority in 2:10. It is my contention, however, that this is not the most straightforward reading of 2:5, even in isolation. It is a possible reading, but for this reading to be probable, the context has to provide clues that God is the one who ultimately forgives. Without such contextual clues, Jesus' words of forgiveness in 2:5 are better interpreted along the same lines as his words in 2:10.

In terms of style, scholars also argue that the repetition of the phrase λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ in v. 5a and v. 10b is an indication that two units have been stitched together. The tortured syntax in 2:10–11 is viewed as additional evidence of a secondary insertion. A subordinate purpose clause directed to the scribes (ἵνα δὲ εἰδῆτε ὅτι ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) is interrupted by a main clause addressed to the implied audience (λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ), followed by Jesus' direct address to the paralytic (σοὶ λέγω, ἔγειρε ἆρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ ὕπαγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου). However, these phenomena stem from the subject matter: Jesus' addressing the scribes concerning his interaction with the paralytic. That it was felt necessary to employ this syntactical infelicity in order to tell the story can be seen by comparing with Matthew and Luke. They have both made numerous modifications to the pericope, including several changes to Jesus' words in vv. 10–11, but they have kept the syntactical structure of these verses unaltered.

With respect to the nature of the story, it is unlikely that the forgiveness account (2:1–5) would ever have existed without the ensuing controversy (2:6–10). As Gerd Theissen points out, Jesus' provocative words of forgiveness almost require a reaction from the other characters in the narrative. Formally, he also observes that an assurance of healing is rarely directly followed by an account of the healing itself.[31]

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[31] Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 164; cf. also Dewey, *Markan Public*

There are no compelling reasons, therefore, to assume that Mark 2:1–12 is a composite story. It is rather an integrated story that most likely rests on interrelated historical events: Jesus forgave sins by his own authority, an activity that was perceived to be blasphemous, and, in order to legitimate his actions, he was perceived to provide miraculous healing. At the earliest traceable stage, the account belonged together with the other stories that now make up Mark 2:1–3:6.[32] If this composition is pre-Markan, the evangelist may of course have subjected it to some editing, most likely in terms of its setting. It is also conceivable that the Son of Man-saying in v. 10 (”so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”) is a theological commentary that has been added by the evangelist.[33] Viewed in the immediate context, this saying does not add new information to the story, except for the introduction of the Son of Man-title. The theological point that Jesus forgives on his own authority is the most natural interpretation of his words in v. 5, an interpretation that is confirmed both by the blasphemy charge and by the accompanying act of healing. At the literary level, however, the saying serves the important function of identifying Jesus as the Son of Man, and provides the interpretive framework for Jesus’ subsequent sayings about the suffering and future glory of the Son of Man. On the other hand, the lack of positive evidence that the early Christians were interested in developing this title (except for Acts 7:56, it only occurs on Jesus’ lips in the New Testament) serves as a counter-indication to the hypothesis that this saying has been added later. It should therefore not be considered as more than a possibility.

Forgiveness and Jesus’ Self-Understanding

The above considerations show the difficulty of assuming that Jesus’ act of forgiveness was fundamentally reinterpreted in the course of tradition. But if the picture in the Synoptic Gospels is historically reliable, it has serious implications for Jesus’ self-understanding. If Jesus claimed for himself a divine prerogative, he would either have to see himself as some-

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Debate, 77. Theissen later appears to have changed his mind, however (Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, 527).

[32] Cf. note 30.

[33] So Ceroke, “Is Mk 2:10 a Saying of Jesus?” 387–88; contra Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*, 78–79.

one who broke down the conventional barriers between God and human beings, or, as I have argued, he would have to understand himself as someone who could act in God's place.[34] Is it conceivable that a first-century Jew would have held such a view of himself?

I will argue that there are several traits in the earliest Jesus tradition that corroborate such a picture of Jesus. In other words, the historicity of Jesus' forgiveness as an act of divine forgiveness stands well by the criterion of coherence.

To offer forgiveness of sins in the sense indicated above is to anticipate the eschatological judgment of God. It is to announce that a person is free from guilt in God's judgment. On this interpretation, Jesus' forgiveness corresponds to his claim to function as the eschatological judge. There are several sayings in which Jesus anticipates a role at the final judgment, but it is not always clear what role he foresees for himself. In some cases, his role is consistent with that of a decisive witness, such as when he declares: "[t]hose who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).[35] But there is one passage which is unambiguous, the judgment scene in Matt 25:31–46.[36] In this passage, Jesus describes his future role as the one who will determine the eternal destiny of "all the nations" (Matt 25:32), described as a shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats.[37]

In Second Temple Judaism, the eschatological judge was assumed to be God, although there are some examples of human and heavenly characters as judges, such as Abel (T. Ab. [A] 13:2–3), the angel Melchizedek (11Q13 II, 13), and, most significantly, the Enochic Son of Man (1 En.

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[34] Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 65–66, 76.

[35] Maurice Casey, *The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem*, LNTS 343 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 185. Most scholars now reject the previously popular view that Jesus referred to someone other than himself as the Son of Man (Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Kendrick Grobel [London: SCM, 1952], 28–32; Heinz Eduard Tödt, *Der Menschensohn in der synoptischen Überlieferung* [Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1959], 105–6; Carsten Colpe, "ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου," in *TDNT* 8:400–477, here 433–60; Ferdinand Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel*, FRLANT 83 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963], 32–53).

[36] The authenticity of this passage is disputed, but a wide range of scholars affirm the historicity of its basic elements. For a discussion and review of scholarly positions, see Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 80–92.

[37] It is debatable whether "all the nations" include the Jewish people, but that question does not fundamentally affect the picture of Jesus as the eschatological judge.

49:4; 55:4). However, these judges do not function as the ultimate judge (cf. T. Ab. [A] 13:7–8; 11Q13 II, 10–11; 1 En. 49:2; 48:2–3; 55:3–4; 61:8–9).[38] Their role is subordinate to God. Jesus' claims in Matt 25:31–46 therefore go further in assuming a function that belonged exclusively to God. In any case, for our present purposes, it suffices to observe that Jesus' claim to be the eschatological judge serves as corroborating evidence for my interpretation of Jesus' forgiveness. If Jesus claimed to determine the destiny of human beings in the afterlife, it coheres with his claim to offer the forgiveness that only God could pronounce.

There are several other aspects of Jesus' ministry that corroborate the picture of a character who saw himself in the role of God.[39] In contrast to Jewish miracle-workers such as Honi the Circle-Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, Jesus does not pray for or appeal to God's power when he is perceived to perform miracles. He also interprets these miracles with a reference to God's own eschatological intervention. As mentioned above, Jesus refers to his exorcisms as proof that God's kingly rule is present. This manifestation of this rule and the concomitant defeat of Satan were in Second Temple Judaism associated with God's own coming (T. Mos. 10:1, 3). In the Lukan version of the Beelzebul pericope (Luke 10:20), Jesus identifies his own exorcisms as the work of God's finger (an expression that elsewhere is used for the unmediated intervention of God [Exod 8:15; 31:18; Deut 9:10]). Jesus also made demands that presupposed an authority that only God could claim. He set aside the commandment to honor one's parents when he asked an aspiring disciple not to bury his father (Matt 8:22 par.). He implicitly substituted commitment to himself for the commandment to love God when he answered the rich man by quoting from the ten commandments and proceeded to tell him to leave everything and follow Jesus (Mark 10:19–21 par.). In the so-called antitheses in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 5:21–48), he implicitly placed his own authority at the same level as the divine commandments when he sharpened these commandments on no other authority than the words "but I tell you."

Scholars reach different conclusions regarding the historicity of these claims, but the cumulative weight of this evidence points in the same direction: Jesus did see himself in a role that in Judaism was reserved for God.

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[38] Grindheim, *God's Equal*, 93–99.
[39] Grindheim, *God's Equal*, *passim*.

Conclusion

I am therefore inclined to read the healing account in Mark 2:1–12 as based on historical events. As is the case with all narratives, it is selective and stylized. However, the fact that Jesus forgave sins, that his forgiveness provoked a charge that he was blaspheming, and that he performed a healing miracle to authenticate his words may all be historically reliable elements.

It is also unlikely that Jesus intended his forgiveness to be understood in analogy with the forgiveness of the prophets. The reference to God as the ultimate source of forgiveness is lacking. If the basic elements of the account in Mark 2:1–12 are accepted as authentic, they positively militate against such an interpretation. Instead, the best interpretation of Jesus' words is that he took it upon himself to do something only God could do, as I have argued.

But even if only the fact that Jesus forgave is deemed to be historical, it is unwarranted to interpret this event in light of the prophets' announcement of forgiveness. Hägerland's examples do not show that human beings were thought to be able to forgive sins in Second Temple Judaism. They show that prophets were thought to be able to announce God's forgiveness. It has not been demonstrated that a claim to forgive, when it stands alone, would have been acceptable. Hägerland's explanation that Jesus' forgiveness was prophetic forgiveness requires the assumption that his words of forgiveness originally belonged in a different context, a context in which a reference to God's forgiveness was made.

If the context in Mark 2:1–12 is deemed inauthentic, the only thing we know is that Jesus announced the forgiveness of sins. Without knowledge of the context in which he made such announcements, we cannot be confident of any interpretation. As long as we do not have any evidence that he made reference to the forgiveness of God, however, the most probable interpretation is still that Jesus was claiming to do something that only God was believed to be able to do.