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Razing Cain: Two North African Christians on the Forgiveness of Debts

LEE BLACKBURN

Students of early Christianity are fortunate to possess works on The Lord's Prayer by two prominent third-century Christians from Carthage: Tertullian and Cyprian.¹ Both authors comment on The Lord's Prayer line by line, explaining the diction and unpacking the significance of each phrase. Surprisingly, both authors' ruminations on this verse conclude with a reference to the sin of Cain. So what in the world does Cain have to do with the forgiveness of debts? And what might Christians today learn from these early Christian interpreters?

TERTULLIAN AND JESUS' REVISION OF THE LAW

Tertullian wrote the treatise *On Prayer* sometime between 198 and 204 AD. It appears that it was already a common north African practice by the turn of the third century for the newly baptized to recite The Lord's Prayer as their first prayer after emerging from the baptismal font. Teachers like Tertullian, then, helped the catechumens (those who were preparing for baptism) understand the import of each line of the prayer that would soon be on their lips.

When Tertullian comes to Matthew 6.12b, he immediately homes in on the fact that Jesus uses the word "debt" as a metaphor for sin: "A debt, in Scripture, is an image of a wrongdoing, because wrongdoing always owes a debt to judgment and is avenged by it; neither does it avoid the justice of restitution unless restitution be given."² This reference to restitution then leads Tertullian to the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18.21–35). Tertullian explains the significance of Jesus' preface to the parable, in which he tells Peter that he should forgive his brother "seventy times seven" times. According to Tertullian, by this stipulation Jesus "cast the law in better form," inasmuch as the Lord's numerical formula recalls Genesis 4.24, wherein vengeance was reckoned sevenfold for Cain and seventy times seven times for Lamech.³ This interpretation is in keeping with Tertullian's remark in the introduction to the treatise that in The Lord's Prayer Jesus "marked out for his new disciples of the new covenant a new form of prayer."⁴ For Tertullian, then, The Lord's Prayer is a sort of manifesto of the new covenant, which, among other things, announces that certain ordinances mandated by the law have either been transformed or permanently suspended. In this way Tertullian stresses Jesus' role as the new Moses, who issues new regulations that accord with the novelty of the gospel, of which The Lord's Prayer is a summary.⁵ In the case of the forgiveness of debt, it

1. English translations of both texts can be found in *Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen: On the Lord's Prayer*, ed. and trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004). All of the translations provided in this essay are taken from this volume.

2. *Ibid.*, 47.

3. *Ibid.*, 48. This exact numerical formula is found in the Septuagint.

4. *Ibid.*, 41.

5. *Ibid.*, 42.

would seem that Jesus has not only abrogated a particular ordinance of the old law, but also turned it on its head, mandating abundant forgiveness in lieu of abundant vengeance. For Tertullian, Jesus' command that his followers forgive their debtors represents the decisive reversal and repealing of the law of retribution established in Genesis 4.24, an ordinance that Tertullian deems representative of the law as a whole.

CYPRIAN AND THE AFTERMATH OF PERSECUTION

Tertullian had few admirers more ardent than Cyprian, who became bishop of Carthage around the year 248, several decades after Tertullian's death. Several features of Tertullian's interpretation of Matthew 6.12b appear in Cyprian's text. For instance, Cyprian connects this verse to the parable of the unforgiving servant. He also, as stated above, mentions Cain towards the conclusion of his discussion of the Christian imperative to forgive.

Cyprian devotes considerably more space (five paragraphs in the English translation) to this verse than Tertullian (two paragraphs). In order to understand why Cyprian wrote at such length on the forgiveness of debts, one must take into account his historical context. Cyprian had been fast-tracked to the office of bishop just before Emperor Decius commenced his persecution of Christians in 250.⁶ According to Decius' edict, all Romans were to make a sacrifice to Jupiter, after which they would receive a certificate verifying their compliance. After Decius died in June 251 and the persecution ceased, Christian leaders like Cyprian were faced with the unenviable task of deciding what to do with those Christians who had either sacrificed or acquired a counterfeit certificate. Sometime after Easter 251 Cyprian presided over a church council in Carthage that ruled that those who had purchased bogus certificates could be allowed to reenter the church after undergoing a process of due penance, whereas those who had actually participated in pagan sacrifice could be readmitted to the church only on their deathbeds.

As one might imagine, this decision was bound not to please everyone, and Cyprian found himself beset on one side by rigorists (those who thought the penalties for those who had compromised their faith should be stiffer) and on the other by the laxists (those who thought the penalties too severe). The state of church affairs in Carthage was in many ways paralleled by the situation in Rome, where the rigorist party had broken away from the mainstream Roman church. In both Carthage and Rome nothing less than the church's unity, which for Cyprian was "an essential mark of the church," was at stake.⁷

CYPRIAN ON THE FORGIVENESS OF DEBTS

Cyprian's concern for church unity comes to the fore in his interpretation of Matthew 6.12b. For Cyprian, when Jesus speaks of pardoning one's debtors he is stressing the importance of maintaining peaceful relationships between members of the church. More specifically, Cyprian thinks that Jesus is warning Christians not to repeat the fratricide of Cain and hence exclude themselves from the kingdom of God. How does Cyprian deduce such a pointed message from the rather laconic expression, "as we also have forgiven our debtors"?

For Cyprian, as for most of the church fathers, one ascertains the meaning of a given scriptural text by weaving around it a dense web of scriptural allusions and references that illuminate that text from a variety of angles. Thus Cyprian begins his exegesis of Matthew 6.12b by juxtaposing it with several other gospel texts, among them Mark 11.25: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."⁸

On the grounds of the striking similarity between these two texts, Cyprian reads Matthew 6.12b through the lens of Mark 11.25 and thus infers that in the former text Jesus is instructing Christians to forgive those with whom they worship, namely, their brothers and sisters in Christ. Why is it so important that Christians

6. See W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 318–324.

7. *On the Lord's Prayer*, 21.

8. Cyprian also quotes Mark 11.26, which the NRSV relegates to a footnote.

forgive one another? Cyprian reminds his audience of the implications of their impending baptism. The Father wishes, Cyprian says, “that we should remain as we are when we are reborn in our second birth, that those who are children of God should remain in the peace of God.”⁹ In other words, Christians should exude a spirit of fraternity because their second birth in baptism renders them children of God and so siblings to one another. The theme of fraternity supplies Cyprian with a bridge to Matthew 5.23–24, which he paraphrases thus: “God does not accept the sacrifice of one who is in dispute, and sends him back from the altar, ordering him first to be reconciled with his *brother*, so that he may pacify God by praying as a peacemaker.”¹⁰ By bringing Matthew 5.23–24 into the discussion, Cyprian further substantiates his case that Matthew 6.12b should be understood as primarily pertinent to relationships between Christians, since one is brother (or sister) to those with whom one shares a common baptism.

In addition, Matthew 5.23–24, which concerns the offering of a sacrifice, is the link in Cyprian’s exegetical chain that ultimately connects Matthew 6.12b with the sacrifices of Cain and Abel. Cyprian amplifies the narrative of Genesis 4 by providing details about Abel’s character that would explain why his sacrifice was pleasing to God: “Abel was peaceable and just, and as he sacrificed in innocence he taught others that, when they offer gifts at the altar, they should come with fear of God, with simplicity of heart, with accustomed justice, with peace and reconciliation.”¹¹ Needless to say, Cain lacked these qualities. But what does Cain’s murder of Abel have to do with forgiving one’s debtors?

For Cyprian, 1 John 3.15 provides the answer: “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer.”¹² The crucial question, then, is what it means for a Christian to hate his brother, that is, another baptized Christian. According to Cyprian, at least one manifestation of fraternal hatred is the refusal to forgive one’s brother and hence to maintain concord in the community: “the one who is disruptive and disagreeable and is not at peace with the brothers . . . shall not be able to escape the charge of hostility toward the brothers.”¹³ Given the fact that Cyprian says this in the context of his interpretation of Matthew 6.12b, he is clearly implying that to withhold pardon from a wrongdoing brother is tantamount to nothing less than fratricide. Further underlining the moral heinousness of the unwillingness to forgive a brother, Cyprian declares that not even martyrdom, “the baptism of blood,” is capable of expunging the stain that such a refusal leaves on the guilty party.¹⁴

Let us review for a moment how exactly Cyprian travels from his starting point of Matthew 6.12b to the terminus of Genesis 4. First, Cyprian connects Matthew 6.12b with Mark 11.25, which also stresses the imperative to forgive others. The explicit liturgical context of Mark 11.25 prompts Cyprian to stress the importance of peace and concord within the house of God. He then reminds his listeners that their imminent baptism will not only grant them access to the house of God, but also make them children of God, and hence siblings to one another. With the theme of fraternity now broached, Cyprian cites Matthew 5.23–24, which speaks of the necessity of reconciliation with one’s brother before one offers a sacrifice. This text’s implication that sacrifices offered by those at odds with their brothers are displeasing to God supplies Cyprian with a segue to the sacrifices of Cain and Abel. Reading Genesis 4 through the lens of Matthew 5.23–24, Cyprian infers that Cain’s sacrifice was displeasing to God because he lacked the irenic spirit of his brother, a lack made tragically manifest by his subsequent murder of Abel. Cain’s killing of Abel in turn evokes 1 John 3.15, which expands the definition of fratricide to include hatred of one’s brother. At last, Cyprian brings us full circle: the refusal to forgive the debt of a fellow Christian, as commanded by Jesus in Matthew 6.12b, is an expression of fraternal hatred, a sin that even martyrdom cannot expiate.

9. *On the Lord’s Prayer*, 82–83.

10. *Ibid.*, 83. Emphasis mine.

11. *Ibid.*

12. This rendering of 1 John 3.15 reflects Cyprian’s Latin translation.

13. *On the Lord’s Prayer*, 83.

14. *Ibid.*, 83–84.

DYNAMICS OF EARLY CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS

As remarkable as this interpretation may seem to modern readers, there is nothing extraordinary about it in the context of patristic exegesis. Recently John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno offered a description of the primary dynamic of early Christian biblical interpretation that is aptly illustrated by Cyprian’s reading of Matthew 6.12b. Speaking of the church fathers collectively, O’Keefe and Reno argue that “the Bible absorbed their attention rather than directing it elsewhere . . . Scripture was the magnetic pole of their thought.”¹⁵ In other words, instead of moving from the biblical text *outwards* toward a non-biblical referent, patristic readers of the Bible tended to move *across* the text of scripture, zigzagging from one gospel to another, from a gospel to Paul, from Paul to the Old Testament, and so on. This serpentine movement makes possible the mutual illumination between seemingly discrete biblical texts that for most of the church fathers simply *was* biblical interpretation. For patristic authors like Cyprian, one discovers the significance of a particular biblical text only by placing it in juxtaposition with other scriptural passages with which it shares a thematic or verbal affinity. This interpretive method does not, however, prevent scripture from speaking about the world outside of scripture. Quite the contrary; Cyprian’s interpretation of Matthew 6.12b appears to be specially calibrated to speak to his fellow Christians in mid third-century Carthage. But the contemporary relevance of the Matthean text emerges only by virtue of Cyprian’s placement of it in the center of a network of scriptural texts that, taken cumulatively, tease out its full significance.

So what is the modern reader, schooled in the methods of historical-critical exegesis, to make of this style of interpretation, whereby one can begin on a Galilean mountainside with Jesus and end on a bloody patch of ground on the outskirts of Eden? It is probably safe to say that Cyprian’s reading of Matthew 6.12b would not appear in a peer-reviewed journal in the field of biblical studies today. Although modern biblical scholars usually find patristic exegesis unpalatable for a host of reasons, perhaps its most regularly reviled quality is its apparent insouciance about authorial intention. On what basis, after all, can Cyprian claim that when Jesus uttered the line “as we also have forgiven our debtors,” he was instructing Christians not to repeat the sin of Cain by refusing to be reconciled with their brothers and sisters in Christ? What evidence exists that would legitimize such an interpretation?

One’s answer to this question will likely hinge on the breadth or narrowness of one’s conception of authorial intention. In his recent book *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture*, Peter J. Leithart argues that the writers of the New Testament, by reading the Old Testament typologically, actually honored the intentions of the human authors of the Old Testament in the deepest possible sense. For instance, Leithart maintains that Matthew 2.15’s claim that Hosea 11.1 (“Out of Egypt I called my son”) was fulfilled by the journey of the Holy Family does not do violence to Hosea’s own intentions, even though “Hosea surely could not have known that he was writing of Jesus, and could not have intended the meaning Matthew attributes to him.”¹⁶ Presumably Hosea, like most great authors, hoped that future generations would derive edification from his writings. He also shared with his fellow Israelites a hope for “a redemption far beyond what Israel already experienced.”¹⁷ For Leithart, then, it stands to reason that Hosea would have recognized and welcomed the fact that his writings would take on fresh meanings upon the advent of that greater redemption, fresh meanings that Hosea himself did not anticipate, but that would be in no way contrary to the spirit in which he wrote the words of his prophecy.

How might one evaluate the exegesis of Cyprian if one construed authorial intention in a broader fashion, as Leithart does? Might it then be possible to see his reading of Matthew 6.12b not as an arbitrary travesty, but as fundamentally consonant with Matthew’s understanding of Jesus’ divine vocation? Does

15. John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 11.

16. Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 65.

17. *Ibid.*

Cyprian's interpretation not mesh with Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the one who embodies and encapsulates the entire history of Israel while setting it on a new course? Is Cyprian's reading not congruent with Jesus' insistence, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, on the need for practices of communal reconciliation? Even if the historical Jesus did not have Genesis 4 consciously in mind when he spoke the words "as we also have forgiven our debtors," on what basis could one exclude the possibility that Jesus, who was so steeped in scripture, would have embraced the suggestion that his command to forgive the debts of others represented a blow against the fraternal discord unleashed into the world by Cain's slaying of Abel?

Furthermore, if one is to be fair to Cyprian, one must pay close attention to the sequence of his exegetical chain. As we have seen, Cyprian links Matthew 6.12b with several other of Jesus' sayings that underscore the need for fraternal reconciliation before he makes the leap to Genesis 4. Thus Cyprian situates the Matthean text within the broader context of Jesus' ministry before he moves on to detect its further biblical resonances. It would simply be false, therefore, to say that Cyprian is blithely unconcerned with establishing the intentionality underlying Jesus' words in Matthew 6.12b. Moreover, it is crucial to note what Cyprian does *not* claim. He never asserts that Jesus had any particular scriptural text in mind at the precise moment when he recited his prayer on the mountain (nor does he make an analogous claim for Matthew the evangelist). Rather, Cyprian proceeds as he does because he presupposes that Jesus' words in Matthew 6.12b, insofar as they are scriptural words, should be placed in their proper scriptural context, which means taking into account not only the Gospels, but also the entire biblical canon. Cyprian, along with virtually all of the church fathers and the rabbis as well, assumed that scripture is always to be interpreted by scripture, just as the ancient grammarians insisted that Homer is always best interpreted by Homer. If scripture is in any meaningful sense a unified text, shot through with the one Spirit of the one God, then it is incumbent on the exegete to make its coherence manifest by establishing meaningful relationships between biblical passages that *prima facie* have little or nothing to do with one another.

CONCLUSION

There remains yet another consideration that often receives short shrift in discussions of the validity of the kind of patristic interpretation typified by Cyprian's treatment of Matthew 6.12b. That consideration is beauty. Of course, beauty is itself a contested concept, but let us provisionally propose that beauty in biblical interpretation encompasses, among other things, both the aesthetic delight that is generated by the illuminating collation of seemingly unrelated biblical texts and the provision of spiritual insight and edification. What if Christians were to adopt beauty as one of the primary criteria of good exegesis? Some may understandably worry about whether the adoption of such a criterion would give altogether too much latitude to the interpreter and send biblical exegesis careening down the rabbit hole of subjectivity. Perhaps it would. Perhaps it would lead to a luxuriant profusion of readings whose legitimacy could not be guaranteed through appeal to an allegedly objective hermeneutical standard. But perhaps such a riot of interpretations would be a pleasing sacrifice to the God of wild fecundity, who saw no reason not to create both the exuberant lemur and the stolid buffalo. Is it then at least possible that early Christian interpreters like Cyprian should not be the objects of our condescending modern gaze, but rather our teachers?

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