

Sin Against the Holy Spirit - Unforgivable?

“Every one who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Luke 12:10). This logion (Mark 3:28-30 = Matt 12:31-32) is one of the most perplexing and enigmatic cruxes in the New Testament. It evokes in us a volley of questions. God is presented in the Bible as one full of love, mercy and forgiveness. “Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ps 86:15). “To the Lord our god belong mercy and forgiveness” (Dan 9:9). It is also significant to see that the phrase, “...for his steadfast love endures for ever” occurs 37 times in the Old Testament. Jesus has revealed to us the God of unconditional love and forgiveness (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus’ very life itself has been an example of forgiveness par excellence (Mark 2:1-12; Luke 7:36-50; 23:34; John 8:1:11).

Does not the above logion then contradict the biblical presentation of God as merciful and forgiving? Is there any sin which God cannot or will not forgive? What is the unforgivable sin? Why is it called unforgivable? What is meant by blasphemy? What does the blasphemy against the Spirit mean? Why is the blasphemy against the Son of Man forgivable and not the blasphemy against the Spirit? What does Jesus want to convey through this logion?

This modest study is intended to delve deep into the meaning of the enigmatic and perplexing logion. The presentation of the logion in the three Synoptic traditions will be the subject matter of our study. To unravel the meaning of the logion, the context in which this logion is recorded will be adequately focussed upon in this study. This endeavour will also include the different, significant attempts made in the past on the interpretation of the logion. Based on all these endeavours, we will attempt to discover better the meaning of the logion in our study.

I. CONTEXT OF THE LOGION IN THE SYNOPTICS

Mark

The "unforgivable-sin logion" is recorded in Mark in the context of the Beelzebul controversy (3:20-30) which is placed closer to the section of the series of conflict narratives (2:1-3:6). The Beelzebul controversy in Mark is found in the context of a conflict narrative between scribes and Jesus about the power with which Jesus casts out demons. This conflict narrative is sandwiched between the material about the relatives and friends of Jesus, who "went out to seize him, for people were saying, 'He is beside himself'" (3:21) and the scribes who accused him of casting out demons with the help of Beelzebul. Mark has employed here a literary device known as "intercalation of incidents" which is effective for indicating a lapse of time, for dramatically heightening the tension or for drawing attention to a significant parallel or contrast.¹ The literary device here helps to bring out the parallel between the religious authorities and Jesus' family both of whom attribute false explanation to his activity. But the accusation of the scribes is very severe as they level charges against him saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons" (3:22), "he has an unclean spirit" (3:30). Mark has placed this logion as one of the responses of Jesus to the devastating accusation of the scribes.

The Beelzebul controversy is placed in a more advanced context of Jesus' public ministry which has provoked opposition, not merely because of his exorcisms and other healings but because of the radical claims that were implicit in his teaching. The arrival of a delegation of the scribes from Jerusalem shows that the Galilean ministry of Jesus had caught the critical attention of the Sanhedrin.² Jesus' ministry of

1. Lane, W.L., *The Gospel according to Mark*. William Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1979, 137.

It is possible that the scribes were official emissaries from the Great Sanhedrin who came to examine Jesus' miracles and to determine whether Capernaum should be declared a "seduced city," the prey of an apostate preacher. Such a declaration required a thorough investigation made on the spot by official envoys in order to determine the extent of the defection and to distinguish between the instigators, the apostates and the innocent. Cf. Lane, 141.

exorcism was wrongly understood and interpreted by some of his contemporary Jews. Jesus was thus faced with misunderstanding, opposition and controversy about the source of his authority for casting out demons. Taylor affirms that Mark 3:20-35 represents a complex of narratives and sayings which illustrate the general theme of charges brought against Jesus.³ Therefore the Beelzebul controversy in Mark, which includes the "unforgivable-sin-logion" is seen as a challenging response of Jesus to the blasphemous charges and severe accusations of *the scribes*.

Matthew

The "unforgivable-sin-logion" in Matthew is found in the pericope of the Beelzebul controversy (12:22-32.) The logion is preceded by the cure of a blind and dumb demoniac (v. 22), which is deemed as a logical and historical Sitz-im-Leben to the controversy.

Mt 12:22-50 divides itself into three subsections.⁴ 12:22-37, is an extended objection story, 12:38-45, an extended testing story and 12:46-50, a succinct correction story. The objection story and the testing story serve primarily to bring out Israel's unbelief. The logion is uttered in the context of Israel's unbelief about the real source of Jesus' authority in casting out demons and this group of unbelievers here is represented by the *Pharisees*.

Douglas Hare states that the Beelzebul controversy is presented in Matthew as a continuation of the Sabbath disputes (12:1-14) which led to the plot to destroy Jesus.⁵ Chrys C. Caragounis holds that the Beelzebul controversy occurs in the context of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, which had reached a critical stage of opposition and misunderstanding at the time of this controversy.⁶ The time gap between

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3. Taylor, V., *The Gospel according to St. Mark*. Macmillan, London, 1952, 240f.
 4. Davies W.D., Dales, Allison C., *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*. T.T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1991,332.
 5. Hare, D.R.A., *Matthew: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993, 137-138.
 6. Caragounis, C.C., "Kingdom of god, Son of Man and Jesus' Self-understanding," *Tyndale bulletin* 40 (1989) 223-228.

Jesus' first proclamation of the Kingdom (Matt 4:17) and the Kingdom logion (Matt 12:28) is to be noted as a number of events have transpired since Jesus' first proclamation of the Kingdom of God. They have brought about a change in Jesus' circumstances and especially in his relation to his environment. Jesus' preaching and healings win him a great esteem and popularity among the people (Mt 4:23-25; 8:1, 27; 9:7, 26, 31, 35) but at the same time they also provoke the suspicion and opposition of the Jewish authorities (9:3, 34; 10:25; 12:1-8).

The progress of the crowd's attitude towards Jesus has considerably grown by the time of the Beelzebul controversy. It has moved from "Never was anything like this seen in Israel," (Mt 9:34) to "Can this be the Son of David?" (Matt 12:23). The Jewish authorities are panicked and perturbed by the crowd's tendency to identify Jesus with the Son of David, which would eventually lead the crowds to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. In order to avert such a happening, the Pharisees accuse and dub Jesus as an agent of Satan, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" (12:24). Thus in Matthew it is the fear of the Pharisees that the people will accept Jesus as their Messiah, which provokes the blasphemous charge. The hard-heartedness and inimical attitude of the Pharisees towards Jesus has reached such a pitch as to accuse Jesus of collusion with Satan. Jesus presents himself not as an agent of Satan but as one empowered by the Holy Spirit and it is in this context the "unforgivable-sin-logion" is placed in Matthew.

Luke

Luke has included the "unforgivable-sin-logion" in the particular context of confessing Christ before others (12:8-12). This takes place in the larger section of the travel account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which occupies the central portion of the Gospel (9:51-18:14).

Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke has not attached the logion to the Beelzebul controversy which is otherwise found in 11:14-23. And his presentation of the logion is not preceded immediately by the cure of a demoniac.

Luke has placed this logion in the context of Jesus' exhortation to disciples in apostolic activity with a hortatory connotation about their

fearless testimony in the face of persecution.⁷ Luke evidently regards 12:1-21 as spoken immediately after the commotion at the Pharisee's house.

Evans A. Craig says that the logion in v. 10 may have been originally independent of the present context.⁸ But its location is appropriate, however, as it replies the question that crops up from vv. 8-9 about the acceptance of the Son of Man before others. The logion declares that even those who deny the Son of Man will be forgiven but not those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. The present context suggests that Luke sees it as referring to the rejection of the gospel as proclaimed with great conviction through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

What does the context of the logion reveal?

Mark and Matthew place the unforgivable-sin-logion in the context of the Beelzebul controversy while Luke in the context of sayings and confessing Christ before others.

All the three synoptics have placed the logion also at some distance from the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus and the Beelzebul controversy is preceded by a number of events which show that a considerable time has elapsed since the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus. The following examples will confirm this. First, the healings of Jesus: the man with the unclean spirit (Mt 1:21-28 = Lk 4:31-37); Peter's mother-in-law and others (Mt 8:14-17 = Mk 1:29-34 = Lk 4:38-41); a leper (Mt 8:1-4 = Mk 1:40-45 = Lk 5:12-16); a paralytic (Mt 9:1-8 = Mk 2:1-12 = Lk 5:17-20) which earn great esteem and fame among the people (Mt 8:27; 9:7, 26, 31; Mk 1:27f. = Lk 4:36; Mk 1:45 = Lk 5:15, 26; 7:16), arouse the suspicion and ill-feeling of the Jewish authorities (Mt 9:34; 10:25; Lk 6:7). Secondly, Jesus' claim as son of Man to have the right to forgive sins exasperates the scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 9:3 = Mk 2:7 = Lk 5:21) who consider it as

7. Fitzmyer, J.A., *The Gospel according to Luke* (X-XXIV). Doubleday, New York, 1985, 963.

8. Craig, E.A., Luke. *New International Biblical Commentary*, Henrikson publishers, Peabody, 1990, 195.

blasphemous. Third, the plucking of grain on the Sabbath (Mt 12:1-8 = Mk 2:23-28 = Lk 6:1-5) which in Jewish eyes rendered Jesus a law-breaker, and Jesus' claim that the Son of Man was Lord of Sabbath, earns him their permanent hostility. Finally, all the three evangelists relate the Jews' decision, following the dispute in connection with the healing of the man with the withered hand, to do away with Jesus (Mt 12:14 = Mk 3:6 = Lk 6:7).⁹ By the time of the Beelzebul controversy Jesus seems to have been confronted with mounting opposition and hostility specially from the Jewish authorities.

In the midst of such opposition and hostility, also grows a confounded tendency in the enemies of Jesus to misinterpret his ministry of casting out demons and attribute it to the power of Satan. They not only accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons but also implicate that Jesus has an unclean spirit. In the context of such a height of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, the "unforgivable-sin-logion" is placed to bring out the intensity and seriousness of their unforgivable hard-heartedness and accusation. Thus the meaning of this enigmatic logion is better understood when the logion is seen in the aforementioned context.

II DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE LOGION

Various interpretations have been attempted to understand the meaning of the logion. We will briefly make a study of the various attempts made so far and elaborate on our understanding of it.

A. Stock considers Mark 3:28-29 not as one harmonious statement but as contradictory and originally independent ones (v. 28 all sins are forgivable; v. 29 blasphemy against the Spirit is unforgivable) and interprets forgiveness in the context of apostasy.¹⁰ According to Stock the logion in v. 28 stated the position of those who were willing to receive back into the community the ones who had fallen away in time of persecution. The logion in v. 29 stated the position of those who denied

9. Caragounis, C.C., 223-224.

10. Gundry, R.H., Mark. W.B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1994, 184.

them reentry. The apostasy-interpretation does not properly explain the meaning of the logion as only believing disciples can commit apostasy. Those who commit the unforgivable sin are opposed to becoming Jesus' disciples as they do not recognize the Holy Spirit in him.

J.C. O'Neill interprets the blasphemy against the Spirit as the blasphemy against the spirit of forgiveness and argues that the blasphemy against the spirit (the spirit in which all sins may be forgiven) is alone unforgivable.¹¹ He comments that the saying about the unforgivable sin occurs in two forms. In the first form all sins will be forgiven men except one, i.e. blasphemy against Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31; Mark 3:28f), and in the second form everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Matt 12:31; Luke 12:10). He then argues that the Son of Man form is a misunderstanding of the first form. This has come about because of a misreading of the construction in the Aramaic saying. The construction was misread because the scribes wanted to see a reference to Jesus the Son of Man wherever they could. According to O'Neill the reference to the spirit was also misread likewise. The original saying of Jesus would have read something like this: blasphemy against this spirit, the spirit in which all sins may be forgiven, is alone unforgivable. All our Greek versions of the saying then made 'this spirit' refer to the Holy Spirit.¹²

The interpretation of the unforgivable sin referring just to the spirit of forgiveness does not adequately help the understanding of the logion. When seen against the context in which Matthew and Mark have placed this logion, this interpretation falls short of seeing the activity and mission of Jesus who is empowered by the Spirit. Therefore the unforgivable sin is not merely against the general spirit of forgiveness but radically it is against the Spirit of God who is working in Jesus.

11. O'Neill J.C., "the Unforgivable Sin," *Journal for the Study of New Testament* 19 (1983), 37-42.

12. *Ibid.*, 37-38.

I.H. Marshall has attempted to interpret the logion as the denial of the work of the Spirit when disciples meet with persecutions and tribulations for their faith. Such apostasy is said to be unforgivable.¹³

In his interpretation Marshall has considered only the context in which Luke has recorded this logion. To understand the proper meaning of the logion, the context proposed by all the synoptic traditions is to be taken into account. Moreover reducing the meaning of the logion only to the disciples' denial of the work of Spirit in times of persecution does not unravel the full meaning of this enigmatic logion. The "unforgivable-sin-logion" is not intended only to the disciples' denial but to anyone who refuses to accept the Spirit of God working in Jesus.

It is the view of F. Nwachukwu and C.O. Manus that the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit is the refusal to repent.¹⁴ Such a refusal to abandon sinning will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come. This interpretation does not bring out the seriousness and gravity of the logion. It is not merely a general refusal to repent; it is basically a determined refusal to accept the real source of authority, i.e., the Holy Spirit who works in and through Jesus in the history of salvation.

Robin Scroggs contends that the logion is the outcome of the exaltation of the Spirit by some early Christians.¹⁵ It is said that an early ecstatic and apocalyptic Christianity existed in communities outside Jerusalem. In these communities there could have been only one leader, the charismatic who was honoured as a prophet. The Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit upon their prophets were highly exalted in these communities. The abilities and powers which were performed under the agency of the Spirit were also exalted.

According to Scroggs, to blaspheme the Spirit means to deny the divine origin of a work done in the Spirit and to reject the authority

13. Marshall I.H., "Hard Sayings - VII. Lk 12:10," *Theology* 67 (1964), 65-67.

14. Nwachukwu, F., Manus, C.O., "Forgiveness and Unforgiveness in Matt 12:31-32." *Africa Theological Journal* 21 (1992), 57-77.

15. Scroggs, R., "The Exaltation of the Spirit by Some Early Christians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965), 359-373.

claimed by the one doing the work. Here the interpretation of the logion is seen as the blasphemy against the Spirit, which meant against the divine origin a work done by the prophet in the Spirit. But attributing the logion to the context of the ecstatic and apocalyptic community goes contrary to the source criticism of the logion, which posits it in the context of the Beelzebul controversy. Also this interpretation of the logion seems to be limited only to the blasphemy against the divine source of work done by the prophet in the Spirit.

III MEANING OF THE LOGION

As it has been stated earlier, the meaning of the "unforgivable-sin-logion" is better discovered and understood when seen in the context of the Beelzebul controversy. It is enlightening and revealing to see the Beelzebul controversy in the context of Jesus' ministry of the Kingdom. The healings of Jesus, especially the casting out of demons, have been generally related to the Kingdom of God, both by the advocates of Realized Eschatology and by those of Futuristic Eschatology.¹⁶ The former school sees them as proof that the Kingdom of God has actually arrived, while the latter indicates that the Kingdom of God is near at hand. The Synoptics have presented eight sayings that speak of the coming or nearness of the Kingdom of God (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 12:28; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9; 10:11; 11:20).

Casting out evil powers - a sign of God's Kingdom

In the words and deeds of Jesus the Kingdom of God has come. The casting-out of demons by Jesus is conceived as an onslaught of the Son of Man on the kingdom of evil. i.e., of Satan. It is performed by Jesus by virtue of his assumption of the role of the Son of Man in connection with Kingdom of God of which he is not merely a Herald but also a Bearer.¹⁷ This comes out quite powerfully in the Beelzebul controversy where Jesus replies to the accusations of his enemies who charged him that he cast out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the

16. Caragounis, C.C., 228-229.

17. Ibid., 231.

kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28 = Lk 11:19). Luke replaces the Spirit of God with "finger of God." Both "the Spirit of God" and "the finger of God" explain the source of authority with which Jesus casts out demons. Thus it is by God's power that Jesus casts out demons and not by the power of Satan as the enemies of Jesus accuse him of.

Moreover in the Beelzebul controversy Jesus ingeniously points to the absurdity of their accusation, "Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?' (Matt 12:25-26 = Lk 11:17-18a). And Jesus asserts emphatically that it is by the Spirit of God he expels demons, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28 = Lk 11:20).

It is not only by the power and Spirit of God that Jesus drives out demons but also in his casting out of demons the kingdom of Satan is shattered and the Kingdom of God is ushered in. For Matthew, as for the early Christians generally, the Holy Spirit had eschatological significance. The appearance of the Spirit in Jesus was evidence that God was inaugurating the Kingdom in the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus.¹⁸ The Expulsion of the demons was a sign of the intrusion and breaking-in of the Kingdom of God. Jesus believed that the power of God was at work in him to overcome evil forces and that his mission in fighting the devil and his dominion was part of God's eschatological deliverance, foreshadowed by the presence of the Kingdom in his casting out of demons. Thus this element is brought out powerfully when Jesus utters, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you." Therefore the ministry of the exorcisms of Jesus is viewed as a sign that Kingdom of God has come. Thus the casting out of demons by Jesus is a powerful work of God, manifested through the Spirit in Jesus.

18. Hare, D.R.A., 139.

Refusal to accept God's Kingdom in Jesus

Refusal to recognise and accept the work of God's Kingdom, manifested by the Spirit in the very person of Jesus is a blasphemy which is treated as an unforgivable sin. Blasphemy was generally considered as a slanderous speech. In Judaism words and deeds that offend God's honour and holiness are counted as blasphemy against God. Thus God is blasphemed when people revile him, curse his name, etc. The scribes were quite familiar with the concept of "the profanation of the Name" denoting generally slanderous speech which defies God's power and majesty.

The blasphemy of the scribes and the Pharisees in the Beelzebul controversy consists in their attributing Jesus' power of exorcism to the prince of demons and slandering thus the true source of Jesus' exorcism i.e., the Holy Spirit. This is a blasphemy against the Spirit as the power of Jesus. Blasphemy against the Spirit is basically an opposition to God as seen in his redemptive and eschatological activity. Jesus' casting out of demons is a sign of God's kingdom. It is God's definitive and active intervention in history for the salvation of humankind in and through Jesus. Refusing to recognise and accept this God-event coming through Jesus by the power of the Spirit and attributing it to Satanic power is blasphemy.

The blasphemy of the adversaries of Jesus consists in two severe accusations: 1. Jesus casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Mark 3:22 = Matt 12:24 = Lk 12:15), 2. Jesus himself has an unclean spirit (Mark 3:30). Jesus' radical teaching on the Kingdom of God did indeed question, disturb and challenge the unjust and inhuman approaches and practices prevalent in the Judaism of his time, calling them thus to real conversion, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15 = Matt 4:17). Instead of facing the challenge and call of Jesus to conversion, the religious leaders allowed themselves to be vexed and angered by it. Moreover they were all scared and alerted by the mounting popularity of Jesus among the people who did not hesitate to call him the Son of David (Matt 12:23), which would result in identifying Jesus as the Messiah. In order to evade the challenge and the call of Jesus to conversion to the Kingdom and to divert the attention of the crowds, the

scribes and the Pharisees in particular level charges against Jesus accusing him of casting out demons by the prince of demons and of possessing an unclean spirit. In Mark the unclean spirit (v. 30) is placed in opposition to the Holy Spirit (v. 29) and it is identical to Beelzebul, the prince of demons. The charges of the enemies of Jesus are not merely their refusal to see the power of the Spirit at work in Jesus but also their identification of the power of the Spirit with that of Satanic power. This almost amounts to calling God Satan, though not said openly. Thus they slander and revile against the power of Jesus and as a result they blaspheme against the power of God Himself present through the Spirit in Jesus.

Sin against the Son of Man - Forgivable

In discussing the unforgivable nature of the blasphemy, the logion presents it in contrast to the sin against the Son of Man. Before getting into a discussion on why this blasphemy is considered as an unforgivable sin, it is good to find why the sin against the Son of Man is forgivable and the one against the Spirit is unforgivable.

Several explanations have been attempted to understand the forgivable sin against the Son of Man. The post-Easter community understood that those who had rejected Jesus the Son of Man in his earthly ministry would be forgiven for that sin, but that they would not be forgiven if they spoke against the activity of the Spirit in post-Pentecostal days.¹⁹ It was considered that blaspheming against the remote Son of Man who is sojourning in heaven is forgivable but not the presently active Spirit. Explaining the forgivable sin against the Son of Man, Bengel says that slandering Jesus as only a man is forgivable while slandering the Holy Spirit and his workings is unforgivable.²⁰ Though these explanations throw some light on the understanding of the forgivable sin against the Son of Man, let us try to grasp better its meaning by entering into a study of the philological and contextual usage of "Son of Man" in the logion.

19. Davies W.D., Dales, Allison C., *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*. T.T.Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, 347.

20. Ibid.

"Son of Man" is recorded both by Matthew and Luke and not by Mark. It is the view of the scholars that "Son of Man" as an Aramaic generic singular can simply mean "human being" and later on it has been extended as a self-referent to Jesus.²¹ When "Son of Man" is understood as "human being" - a generic term, the meaning of the logion is said to mean: All the sins and blasphemies uttered against sons of men will be forgiven; but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

When "Son of Man" is taken as a reference to Jesus, the meaning of the logion is understood thus: Forgiveness is possible to those who slander and blaspheme against Jesus as a person, man and an earthly figure.²² It is possible to speak against the Son of Man and be forgiven because at that time in Jesus' ministry there was a hiddenness about his person.²³

Sin against the Holy Spirit - Unforgivable

In the Beelzebul controversy Jesus who blasts the absurdity of the accusations of his enemies (Mark 3:23-26 = Matt 12:25-26 = Luke 11:17-18) not only explains later the real source of his authority to cast out demons but also confronts them with the gravity and seriousness of their accusations, "... but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29 = Matt 12:32b = Luke 12:10b).

There are certain characteristic features in the text, that make the "unforgivable-sin-logion" a solemn affirmation of Jesus. Mark begins the logion with "Truly I say to you..." (3:28a). This is the first of several

21. Some think of an originally single tradition with the Aramaic phrase *bar nasha* underlying both "to the sons of men" (Mark 3:28) and "against the Son of Man" (Luke 12:10.) In other words, Mark correctly took the Aramaic expression as a generic singular for man and thus translated it with a collective plural; and Luke, or his predecessor, incorrectly took the Aramaic expression as a particularistic singular for Jesus as the Son of Man. Matthew then included both the correct understanding in v. 31 and the incorrect understanding in v. 32. (Cf. Gundry, R.H., *Matthew*, 238).

22. Hare, D.R.A., 140.

23. Mounce, R.H., *Matthew*. New International Bible Commentary. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 1991, 119.

such introductory formulas (13 times) in Mark. This formula of assurance points to a revelatory moment analogous to the authoritative declaration by prophets in OT, "Thus says the Lord". In Judaism and the early Church there was this common liturgical use of a responsive "amen". But the shift of the response formula to an introductory formula stands out here, particularly since this "truly" combined with "I say to you..." occurs only on the lips of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus' prefacing his words with "truly" strengthens his solemn affirmation of the "unforgivable-sin-logic". Thus the unforgivable sin enshrouded in the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is brought out in the logic by Jesus' typical use of the introductory formula and by other characteristic features in the text.

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is presented as a sin which will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come. What is it that makes this blasphemy unforgivably and eternal sin? Determined refusal to recognise and accept the work of God's kingdom, manifested by the Spirit in the very person of Jesus and attributing the power of the Spirit to Satanic power make the blasphemy an unforgivable sin.

The very person of Jesus on earth with all his teaching and ministry of the Kingdom of God empowered by the Spirit is the greatest manifestation of God's intervention in human history and His deepest concern for the salvation of the world. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power" (Heb 1:1-3a). The Spirit who is the power of God was manifestly present in Jesus' public ministry of the Kingdom. The placing of the logic by all the Synoptic traditions at some advanced stage of Jesus' public ministry is also significant and a number of events manifesting the power of the Spirit in the miracles, healings and teachings of Jesus have preceded the occurrence of the logic. But the enemies of Jesus not only refuse to acknowledge the Spirit of God at work in Jesus but also they attribute his power to that of Satan. The contrast is not between an inferior being - the Son of Man, against whom blasphemy is forgivable, and a superior being, the Holy Spirit, against whom blasphemy is unforgivable - but between the person of the Son of Man

in his present hiddenness which makes misunderstanding forgivable and the activity of the Holy Spirit through the Son of Man, rejection of which implies willful resistance against the salvific act of God.

The hard-heartedness and refusal of Jesus' enemies to see the power of God at work in him, their hostility and resistance to respond to the challenge and call of Jesus to conversion to the Kingdom and their audacity and confounded determination to attribute the power of Jesus to the diabolic, make them reach such a state of incapacity and resistance that they will not be able to receive the forgiveness of God and it becomes an unforgivable sin.

This incapacity does not contradict the ever-forgiving spirit of God. It is not God who is unwilling to forgive but it is those who commit such a blasphemy are unwilling to receive forgiveness as they have reached such a state of incapacity and resistance. Those who commit such a blasphemy are exposing themselves to a moral danger of ever-increasing gravity. For to call good evil and the Spirit Satan in this way is deliberately to pervert all moral values and to persist in such an attitude can only result in a progressive blunting of moral sensibility, the ultimate conclusion of which will be to become so hardened in sin as to lose for ever the capacity to recognize the value of good and to be attracted by it. Thus their sin becomes unforgivable either in this age or in the age to come. By entering into such an irremediable state, they distance themselves from God and hurl upon themselves eternal judgment and condemnation.

To Conclude...

The "unforgivable-sin-logion" is better understood when it is seen in the larger context of conflict narratives and in particular in the context of the Beelzebul controversy.

All the three Synoptic traditions place the logion at some advanced stage of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, which had reached a critical stage of mounting opposition and misunderstanding at the time of the Beelzebul controversy.

When the logion is seen in the wider context of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom, we understand that in the words and deeds of Jesus

has come the Kingdom of God. Jesus' casting out of demons is considered as a sign of the coming of God's Kingdom to overthrow the power and rule of Satan.

It is convincingly brought out in the context of the Beelzebul controversy that Jesus drives out demons, not by the power of the prince of demons, but by the Spirit of God. Therefore the blasphemy of the enemies of Jesus against the Spirit, which consists in their two accusations that Jesus casts out demons by the power of demons and he has an unclean spirit is an unforgivable sin.

The unforgivable sin of the blasphemy against the Spirit is discussed in parallel to the blasphemy against the Son of Man, which is presented as forgivable because it is treated as a blasphemy against the earthly Jesus found in certain hiddenness of his divine nature.

The interpretation of the "unforgivable-sin-logion" as determined refusal of the critics of Jesus to recognise the accept the work of God's Kingdom, manifested by the Spirit in the very person of Jesus and their attribution of the power of Jesus to Satanic power helps us to peel off the enigmatic layers covering the logion.

The unforgivable nature of this blasphemy does not contradict the ever-forgiving spirit of God as the unforgivableness is brought about by the incapacity and determined resistance of the blasphemer to receive forgiveness.

Jesus embodies God's definitive and active intervention in history for the salvation of humankind. Jesus is the crown and culmination of the various manifestations of God's Kingdom. Jesus' words and deeds have proclaimed the Kingdom of God. His casting out of demons is a sign of the coming of God's Kingdom to vanquish the rule of Satan. The real source of Jesus' exorcisms is the Spirit of God. Determined resistance and audacious refusal to recognise and accept this God-event coming through Jesus by the power of the Spirit and attributing Jesus' power to Satan are indeed a blasphemy which is unforgivable. Hence the unforgivable nature of this sin against the Holy Spirit is better understood by the incapacity and determined resistance of the blasphemer to recognise and accept the work of God's Kingdom manifested by the

Spirit in the very person of Jesus. Thus this modest study of the "unforgivable-sin-logion" has not only helped our understanding of its meaning and gravity but also the pivotal role of Jesus in the history of God's intervention in the world.

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