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**Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit in the Synoptics:
An Arbitrary Limit to God’s Forgiveness?**

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Introduction

The Synoptics each have their own version of Jesus’ ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ saying, which denies forgiveness to those who fall under its ban. In order to explore whether this is an arbitrary limit to God’s forgiveness, each saying will be examined in isolation,

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before then being examined as part of its Gospel context. Rather than being arbitrary, the article will conclude that the saying reflects a limit that is entirely consistent with the concrete manner in which God's forgiveness is graciously offered to human beings.

McKnight summarizes the sin as being, 'Overt, verbal, and conscious repudiation of the fact that God is at work in Jesus Christ accomplishing his designs through the power of the Holy Spirit'.² But even with such a clear definition, McKnight notes that this saying is not an easy one: 'Exactly what is being described by this expression, found in Mark 3:29 (par. Matt 12:32; Luke 12:10) has vexed both scholars and ordinary Christians for centuries'.³ Origen explained this sin as post-baptismal sin.⁴ Augustine's influential interpretation explained it as final impenitence and resistance to God's grace. In the medieval period, Lombard saw it as a genus containing six species of sin: despair, presumption, impenitence, obstinacy, resisting divine truth known as such, and envy of other's spiritual welfare.⁵ The English Calvinists and their counterparts in the USA held this sin in great fear, being equated with resisting divine truth with malice and a sign of final reprobation.⁶ John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, for example, shows how the saying could torment sensitive people who agonized over the possibility they had committed the sin. Thinking they had and were therefore beyond the pale of mercy, some such as John Child, even took their own lives.⁷ Contemporary Roman Catholic teaching follows Augustine that the sin is the deliberate refusal to accept God's mercy by repenting.⁸

Each of these interpretations are interested in identifying the sin as it applies to the interpreter's own setting. Before turning to questions of application, however, the primary task is to examine

2 McKnight, 'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', 67.

3 McKnight, 'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', 67.

4 McKnight, 'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', 68.

5 Augustine: *Sermo* 71; MPL 71.38, cols. 444–67; Schaff, *Select Lib NPNF*, 6.318–32. In another place, he argues that 'it is not that this was a blasphemy which under no circumstances could be forgiven, for even this shall be forgiven if right repentance follows it', *Sermons on NT Lessons*, 21.35; NPNF 16: 330. Lombard: NCE 13:248; Donahue & Harrington, *Mark*, 134.

6 Donahue & Harrington, *Mark*, 134.

7 Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.349. See also Richard Baxter, 'For the Prevention of the Unpardonable Sin against the Holy Ghost'.

8 Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1864; Donahue & Harrington, *Mark*, 135.

what the saying meant in its original setting within Jesus' ministry, as reported by the Synoptic Gospels. Such an examination will not only enable better thought about contemporary application, but it will also enable an answer to the question whether the 'blasphemy against the Spirit', as presented by the Synoptic Gospels, represents an arbitrary limit to God's forgiveness.

A. Three Forms

This section examines the three Synoptic forms of the saying, describes their comparative differences, and briefly discusses their possible interrelation.

1. Mark 3:28–29

Mark 3:28 Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πάντα ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ ἀμαρτήματα καὶ αἱ βλασφημίαι ὅσα ἐὰν βλασφημήσωσιν·

Mark 3:29 ὃς δ' ἂν βλασφημήσῃ εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἀλλὰ ἐνοχός ἐστιν αἰωνίου ἀμαρτήματος.

In Mark's version, Jesus adds extra gravity to the saying by using the solemn introductory formula ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν (also in Mark 3:28; 8:12; 9:1, 41; 10:15, 29; 12:43; 13:30; 14:9, 18, 25, 30; [16:20]. Matthew: 32x; Luke: 6x; John doubles ἀμὴν ἀμὴν, about 25x). He leads with a strong statement of the universal extent of what will be forgiven: πάντα ἀφεθήσεται 'everything will be forgiven'. The semitic-flavoured indirect object (τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων) continues the note of universality, since its very general nature encompasses anybody, 'to the sons of men'.⁹ The universality is stressed a third time in the appositional phrase expanding πάντα, specifying the kind of things assured of being forgiven, namely, τὰ ἀμαρτήματα καὶ αἱ βλασφημίαι, 'the sinful acts and the blasphemies'. The universality is stressed a fourth and fifth time, when the relative clause ὅσα ἐὰν βλασφημήσωσιν further generalises αἱ βλασφημίαι, and when it provides a generalised subject through the verb, 'as many as they might blaspheme'. At the same time the kind of acts to be forgiven move towards a greater specificity, from 'all things', to 'sinful acts', and ending with 'blasphemies'—then stressed by the repetition

⁹ For Markan analogies to the expression 'sons of men', cf. 'sons of the bridal-chamber' (2:19); 'sons of thunder' (3:17).

created by the use of the cognate verb in the relative clause in final position. Thus, what is particularly in focus by the end of this first half of the saying is blasphemy.

What is blasphemy? Although explanations of the saying quickly move to a fairly technical sense of wrongful speech with respect to God, such as the abuse of the divine name,¹⁰ the Greek word can denote the dropping of evil or profane words about anybody, thus acting as a more general term for abusing or insulting, as well as the speaking lightly or amiss of sacred things (LSJ), and it finds its opposite in εὐθημέω ‘I speak well of’.

After the strong emphasis upon the universality of forgiveness, the second part of the saying comes as something of a shock when it introduces an exception. While retaining the focus on blasphemy, it now switches attention to the person who blasphemes a particular object, ὃς δ’ ἂν βλασφημήσῃ εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον. Given the antithetical parallelism operating, the δέ is clearly adversative, and the preposition εἰς here, being after a verb of speech, ought to be rendered ‘in regard to’, rather than ‘against’ (LSJ, IV.2). Clearly it is this end of the saying that provides Jesus’ main point: ‘but whoever might blaspheme in regard to the Holy Spirit ...’

The main clause returns to the theme of forgiveness. Whereas the theme of blasphemy moved from the substantive to the verbal form, the theme of forgiveness, which began with the verb (v.28), now moves to the substantive. The clause is expressed starkly, simply with a negated verb in present tense-form and the noun: ‘has no forgiveness’. The extent of the lack receives horrifying elaboration with the prepositional phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ‘into eternity’, or ‘forever’. This deictic marker provides the situation in which the imperfective aspect of the present tense-form can be explained: the person in view ‘has no forgiveness’ now and into eternity. After the negated verb (οὐκ ἔχει), the strong contrast (ἀλλά) introduces another present tense-form verb (ἔστιν) indicating the positive situation which prevails in the same period instead: ἔνοχος ἐστὶν αἰωνίου

¹⁰ E.g. ‘Blasphemy is a sin consisting of a verbal utterance or action grossly disrespectful of God, expressing an arrogant rejection of his majesty or authority, or casting contempt upon his providence, words, or works’; Archer, ‘Blasphemy’, 64; ‘miscalling [in the Greek]’, but in a more developed sense ‘an extreme lack of religious reverence manifested primarily in the improper use of expressions referring to God or in the use of improper expressions about God’; Mahoney, ‘Blasphemy’, 62.

ἀμαρτήματος. The subject is carried over and ἔνοχος speaks of guilt or liability, with the following genitive providing the cause of the liability: ‘he is liable for ... [a] sin’. Although Greek has no indefinite article, the form of the noun may justify this addition in English translation, for ἀμάρτημα classically refers to a particular sinful outcome, rather than the sinful activity itself (ἀμαρτία). However, since the adjective (αἰώνιος) aligns this sin with the time period already in view from the prior clause (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα), a more general prevailing state is introduced: ‘liable for eternal sin’.¹¹ To put the contrastive portion of Jesus’ saying together, the one who blasphemes in regard to the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but (logically, therefore) will be liable for eternal sin.

2. Matthew 12:31–32

12:31 Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν, πᾶσα ἀμαρτία καὶ βλασφημία ἀφεθήσεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἡ δὲ τοῦ πνεύματος βλασφημία οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται.

12:32 καὶ ὃς ἐὰν εἴπῃ λόγον κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· ὃς δ’ ἂν εἴπῃ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου, οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ οὔτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι.

In Matthew’s version, Jesus loses his formal opening (cf. Mark’s ἀμήν) to gain a causal connection with the preceding saying (διὰ τοῦτο). Matthew draws Mark’s elaboration into the initial universal, at the same time changing Mark’s concrete acts of sin (τὰ ἀμαρτήματα) to the more generalised activity (ἀμαρτία), and simplifying the indirect object from ‘sons of men’ to ‘men’ (τοῖς ἀνθρώποις). Overall, the saying retains the same sense, while taking on a more streamlined feel, and losing its emphatic nature by discarding Mark’s ἀμήν and by the collapse of his appositional phrase with its relative clause. In Matthew, the first half of Jesus’ saying speaks of the universality of forgiveness in a matter-of-fact tone, merely as the requisite assumption for the second half — which thereby receives the emphasis.

The contrast is drawn just as swiftly and simply, forged by the adversative δέ, the repetition of key terms in parallel order (βλασφημία ... ἀφεθήσεται), and the negation of the same verb as in the first half and in exactly the same form (οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται). The new

¹¹ France, *Mark*, 176, ‘Guilty of eternal consequences’.

information is given by the specification of the kind of blasphemy in view, by way of a simple genitival relation: it is a blasphemy τοῦ πνεύματος, ‘of the Spirit’. Without the greater specificity provided by Mark’s fuller description (τὸ ἅγιον), Matthew’s version relies upon the context to identify the spirit in view (see 12:18, 28, 32). By changing Mark’s ὅς δ’ ἂν βλασφημήσῃ to ἡ τοῦ πνεύματος βλασφημία, Matthew changes focus from the person potentially acting in this way, to the act viewed substantivally—perhaps regarded as a sin one possesses, or which is/will be charged to one’s account. The simple denial in the future tense (οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται) completes the contrast effectively and simply: this blasphemy ‘will not be forgiven’. Matthew delays providing a parallel for Mark’s eternal perspective (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα) at this point, and drops altogether Mark’s elaborative statement about the liability for eternal sin.

For Matthew’s version provides a different elaboration. After simplifying Mark’s saying and shifting the focus to the substantive sin to be accounted for, Matthew’s elaboration then refocuses upon the person who might commit this sin (ὅς ἂν ... ὅς δ’ ἂν ...), utilizing two-part antithetical parallelism. The previous language of blasphemy (βλασφημία) is now explained with an equivalent verbal expression: this hypothetical person ‘might speak a word against’ (εἶπη λόγον κατὰ). In this fashion, Matthew’s version clearly focuses blasphemy as a crime of speech, although, as with confession or acknowledgement (see 10:32), such speech certainly can represent an orientation of life at the time it is uttered.

The basic contrast between the two outcomes remains the same as that in verse 31: ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ ... οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ. The word that will not be forgiven is, as in verse 31, that spoken against the Spirit, although this time in parallel with Mark’s greater specification, the Holy Spirit. The new idea comes in the first object against which a word is spoken: κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ‘against the Son of Man’. If a person speaks a word against the Son of Man it will be forgiven him, but if a person speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.

To end the saying, Matthew provides his equivalent to Mark’s eternal perspective, which is just as chilling, and perhaps more semitic: οὔτε ἐν τούτῳ τῷ αἰῶνι οὔτε ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι, ‘neither in this nor in the coming age’. Although not having an equivalent for Mark’s

‘eternal sin’, Matthew agrees with Mark that the state of non-forgiveness abides across the two ages.

3. Luke 12:10

Luke 12:10 Καὶ πᾶς ὃς ἐρεῖ λόγον εἰς τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· τῷ δὲ εἰς τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα βλασφημήσαντι οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται.

Luke’s version is not at all parallel to Mark 3:28–29, but it is instead similar to Matthew’s second version of the saying (Matt 12:32). Luke differs from Matthew, however, in the following ways. Luke strengthens the indefinite subject ὃς ἐάν, by utilising the universal pronoun: πᾶς ὃς, ‘everyone who’. Instead of the subjunctive εἴπη, Luke has the future ἐρεῖ. In both halves of the saying he has εἰς instead of Matthew’s κατά, ‘a word concerning’. The second half of the saying clarifies this as negative when Luke replaces the ‘speak a word in regard’ structure with the verbal form of blasphemy, ‘for the one who blasphemes concerning the Holy Spirit’. Luke is content to leave the time-frame unspecified, simply announcing the consequences in the future tense, ‘will not be forgiven’.

4. Interrelation of the Sayings

As is usual in Synoptic studies, similar versions of the one saying raise the issue of their interrelationship, and, with this saying, this is generally regarded as rather complex.

From the comparison above, it seems clear that the Synoptics contain two versions of the saying: a Markan version (Mark 3:28–29; Matt 12:31) and a Q version of the saying (Luke 12:10; Matt 12:32), with Matthew providing a blend of the two.

It is often noted in discussions of the origin of the saying, that perhaps independent parallels can also be found in the *Gospel of Thomas* 44 (‘Jesus said: Whoever blasphemes against the Father, it shall be forgiven him, and whoever blasphemes against the Son, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either on earth or in heaven’),¹² and in *Didache* 11.7 (‘and every prophet speaking in the Spirit do not tempt or judge; for every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be

¹² Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.344 n.57, regard this as a secondary development of the Q tradition; but also find a direct influence of Mark (probably via Matthew), in ‘neither on earth nor in heaven’.

forgiven'.¹³ According to Davies & Allison it is 'now probably a minority position'¹⁴ to take the saying as dominical— a view they share. However, the reading of the text offered below strengthens this case even further by showing how appropriate it is within the setting of Jesus' ministry to first-century Israel.

Rather than proposing that the three forms of the saying were radically reshaped while passing through an oral stage of circulation within the churches,¹⁵ the reading below will show each form has essentially the same meaning, albeit tweaked to favour the style and emphases of the different evangelists.

If Luke is close to Q, then Matthew 12:31 must depend wholly on Mark, which Matthew has revised to increase the parallelism with verse 32, resulting in Matthew alone having two antithetical couplets, standing in synonymous parallelism (31a, 31b //32a, 32b). Matthew's Greek improves Mark's, and 'men' for 'sons of men' helps to avoid confusion with 'Son of Man' (v.32a). Sins are offences against fellow human beings, and blasphemies against God. Under such crafting, 'the statement, which looks forward to the last judgment, is simply a way of declaring God's readiness to forgive'.¹⁶

When Mt 12:31a=Mk 3:28 is compared to Lk 12:10=Q, 'all sins will be forgiven the sons of men' and 'everyone who speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven' have been taken as 'almost certainly variants of the same Aramaic original, which was read in two different ways'.¹⁷ On this view, Jesus may have used the term 'son of man' generically, not with reference to himself.¹⁸ But, on the contrary, Matthew consistently uses 'Son of Man' as both a title and exclusively as a self-referent.¹⁹ This observation not only overturns this reading, but it also prepares the ground for a better explanation of

¹³ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.344, n.58, find this closer to Mark than to Q.

¹⁴ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.345.

¹⁵ 'It is wholly inconceivable, that in a statement of such gravity the evangelists arbitrarily introduced changes into a written text which they had before their eyes. On the contrary, we can easily understand how this saying, while circulating in the churches in the shape of oral tradition, assumed somewhat different forms', Godet, *Luke*, 341.

¹⁶ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.345.

¹⁷ See Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.345, reporting the view of Lindars.

¹⁸ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.346.

¹⁹ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.346.

the saying, arising from a better understanding of the referent to the ‘Son of Man’.

B. The Saying in Gospel Context

The sayings of Jesus do not come to us in glorious isolation, but they are always embedded in the Gospel context. Each version takes on its particular meaning by reference to the context of the Gospel narrative of which it forms an integral part. (See summary, Table 1).

1. Mark

In Mark, the saying occurs as part of Jesus’ ‘Beelzeboul controversy’ with the Pharisees who came up to Galilee from Jerusalem (3:22–30). More broadly, this is part of Mark’s first major narrative movement (1:14–4:34), and part of its third subsection (3:7–35).²⁰ It is preceded by the last scene of subsection two, in which Jesus healed a man with a withered hand and, as a result, the Pharisees and Herodians took counsel on how they might kill him (3:1–6). It is followed by subsection four, which consists of Jesus’ Parables discourse (4:1–34). This discourse opens with the parable of the sower, and which calls for listening and accepting the word being proclaimed (4:20), as the key to enter the future harvest. The parable of the lamp and its associated sayings (4:21–25) reinforce the need to listen well, and the parables of the sudden harvest (4:26–29) and the mustard seed (4:30–32) provide the reality behind the harvest metaphor: the harvest is the kingdom of God, which will suddenly arrive in human history (4:29) and it will be a universal kingdom encompassing the whole of the earth (4:32; cf. Dan 4:10–12).

Jesus delivers the saying as a warning to the scribes from Jerusalem, in reply to the opinion they had been expressing about him. This opinion is introduced with the imperfect ἔλεγον, with no indication of their audience, and the combined effect suggests that this was what they were generally noising abroad, rather than being a specific charge with which they confronted Jesus.²¹ The rumour they

²⁰ I have previously followed this narrative structure in Bolt, “‘With a View to the Forgiveness of Sins’”; *Jesus’ Defeat of Death*; and *The Cross from a Distance*.

²¹ This opinion played a significant role in the eventual demise of Jesus, for the report that he was put to death for sorcery echoes through the Jewish sources; see the texts listed in Bolt, *Jesus’ Defeat* [Footnote continued on next page ...]

were circulating was that he was a magician, a sorcerer, utilising the power of the underworld to work his powers over unclean spirits. Mark provides the report in two parts (3:22, note ὅτι ... ὅτι): 1. ‘He has Beelzeboul’ (Βεελζεβοὺλ ἔχει), that is, he has Beelzeboul under his power to manipulate for his own ends; and 2. ‘By the prince of demons he casts out the demons’ (ἐν τῷ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων ἐκβάλλει τὰ δαιμόνια). As the final explanation in the scene, Mark ties the blasphemy saying directly to this opinion: ‘because they were [had been] saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”’ (3:30, ὅτι ἔλεγον· πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον ἔχει).

Mark reports an occasion when Jesus challenged this opinion. He began by questioning the logic of their opinion, then further elaborated in parables, concluding: if Satan is divided amongst himself, then ‘his end has come’ (3:23–26). He followed this by the offer of an alternative perspective on his actions against the demons, again in parables: perhaps he is binding the strong man before the ultimate plunder of his house (3:27). As the third and final part of his response, he gave them a very serious warning, by way of the ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ saying (3:28–29).

Mark places the Beelzeboul controversy as the central portion of one of the first of his famous ‘Markan sandwiches’ (3:20–21, 22–30, 31–35). This intercalation device forces this scene to be read in the light of Jesus’ family seeking to take him home and his decision to stay amongst those who do the will of God.

The entire unit is concerned with the origins of Jesus’ power. The centre canvasses two potential sources: is it an unclean spirit/Beelzeboul (3:22)? Or is it divinely sourced to enable an attack on the strong man (3:27)? In the outside layer, Jesus’ family seeks to bring him back to Nazareth, from whence he departed to be baptised by John (1:9). At his baptism at the Jordan he heard the heavenly voice, declaring him to be ‘Son of God’ (Psalm 2:7) and ‘Servant of the Lord’ (Isa 42:1), and event which set his ministry into motion, as he proclaimed the fulfilment of the times and the nearness of the Kingdom of God (1:15). The family’s call for him to come home is tantamount to a reversal of this divine call, by requesting him to

of Death, 124 n.272; and, most recently, Instone-Brewer, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’s Trial in Sanhedrin 43a’.

return to his Nazareth beginnings (cf. 6:2–3), and so to forget his vocation and destiny as the Son-Servant. The scene closes with Jesus' determination to stay amongst his new family, those who do the will of God (3:34–35): he *will* fulfil his divine calling. This scene therefore functions to reset the direction of the narrative and the perspective of the reader. The scribes rumoured that he was operating by demonic /magical forces. He suggested he had, instead, begun a campaign that will result in the defeat of the 'strong man' altogether. By wrapping this interchange into the account of Jesus' resisting his family's call to go back behind his Jordan call to his thoroughly human origins, Mark reminds the readers that Jesus has already embarked upon his ministry as Son-Servant. That is why he is doing what he is doing, and, despite the opposition from these powerful men from Jerusalem and the pull from his own family, that is the will of God that he is still committed to fulfilling. In the flow of the narrative, before Mark calls upon 'anyone with ears to hear' to listen well in view of the imminent coming of the universal kingdom (Mark 4:1–34), he provides some examples of the powerful (scribes) and the intimate (family) who have not listened well and are therefore outsiders, as well as a small group of insiders who have apparently understood (3:34–35).

The blasphemy warning needs to be understood as an integral part of these concrete circumstances of Jesus' ministry. From beginning (1:1) to end (15:39), Mark is clear that Jesus is the Son of God, and this is clearly one of the perspectives he is moving his readers towards adopting. But in order to understand the nature of Jesus' messiahship, the readers also need to understand Jesus' role as the Suffering Servant promised by the prophet Isaiah. This key figure—and especially his relationship to the expectation of forgiveness—lies behind Jesus' blasphemy saying.

Isaiah looked forward to the arrival of the forgiveness of sins (cf. Isa 40:1–2), and to the ministry of the Servant of the Lord, who was the agent through whom forgiveness would come.²² To prepare the people of Israel for the arrival of this long-awaited blessing, John the Baptist preached 'a baptism of repentance with a view to the

²² See my previous discussions 'The Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels: the Equipment of the Servant'; and "'With a View to the Forgiveness of Sins'".

forgiveness of sins' (1:4, βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). When Jesus came to the Jordan and was baptised by John, he saw heaven torn open (1:10, cf. Isa 64:1) and the Spirit descending upon him, and he heard a voice from heaven declaring 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (1:11). The designation of Jesus as the Son of God alludes to the messianic Psalm 2:7. The descent of the Spirit and the statement 'with you I am well pleased', alludes to Isa 42:1, the first of the 'servant songs'. From this moment on, the presence of the Spirit upon Jesus is his equipment as the Son of God, operating as the Servant of the Lord.

The first subsection (1:14–2:12) of Mark's first narrative movement (1:14–4:34) climaxes with the healing of the Capernaum paralytic (2:1–12). The theme of Jesus' authority is present throughout the subsection, being demonstrated in his proclamation (1:15) and his initial call of the first disciples (1:16–20), and receiving specific comment in the Capernaum synagogue (1:21–28) —in contrast to that of the scribes—, but this scene reveals the nature of this authority. Under the questioning gaze of the scribes, Jesus heals the paralytic as a demonstration that, as Son of Man, he is authorised to forgive sins in the land [of Israel] (2:10, ἐξουσίαν ἔχει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἀφιέναι ἁμαρτίας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). As Jesus, the Son of Man, commences his ministry, the long-awaited era of Israel's forgiveness has begun to arrive. It is in this broader salvation-historical context that Jesus warns the scribes not to blaspheme the Holy Spirit.

McKnight helpfully seeks to understand the blasphemy saying in the flow of the Biblical story, with the Spirit referring to what is happening within Jesus' earthly ministry. In common with many others, he reads the Spirit as a sign of the new age, drawing attention to the OT hope of the last days' reception of the Spirit; to Israel being led by the Spirit and yet grieving the Spirit (Isa 63:7–64:11, see 63:10); and to the prayer for God to come down (Isa 64:1). He notes that at Jesus' baptism the Spirit came down, fulfilling the OT hopes, and yet, still being hardened, Israel grieves the Spirit yet again (Isa 63:10; Mark 3:29). Jesus warns them, because he sees this problem from Israel's past now recurring in response to his ministry.²³

²³ McKnight, 'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', 68.

Although this interpretation is moving in the right direction, the Spirit received by Jesus at his baptism needs to be understood, not against the general prophetic promises of the arrival of the new age (such as Joel 2, which the NT sees specifically fulfilled at Pentecost; Acts 2), but against the more ‘messianic’ prophetic promise of the Spirit bestowed upon the Servant of the Lord (Isa 42:1–4; 61) so that he might complete his ministry of bringing ‘justice to the nations’ by means of the forgiveness of sins.

The opinion espoused by the scribes from Jerusalem attributed Jesus’ ministry to ‘an unclean spirit’ (3:30), ‘Beelzeboul, the Prince of demons’ (3:22), rather than to the Holy Spirit who had descended upon him at the Jordan, marking him out as the Son of God who would be the Servant of the Lord. Since the ministry of the Servant included bringing the long-awaited forgiveness of sins to the land, this misattribution meant that the scribes were in danger of missing out on forgiveness. The only alternative left to them is therefore to be ‘liable for eternal sin’, for their misunderstanding of Jesus led them to reject the only person authorised to bring them their forgiveness. Jesus’ famous ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ saying is a gracious warning to those with a mistaken opinion, to rethink and to come to a better mind, while there is still time.

2. Matthew

Matthew also reports the saying as part of the Beelzeboul controversy. The charge that Jesus was operating by Beelzeboul is of particular interest to Matthew, and this is the third time he repeats a version of it (9:34; 10:25; 12:24). Matthew has a number of differences to Mark, in both the blasphemy saying and its context, which strengthen the links with the Servant of the Lord, thereby indicating that the version of the saying in this Gospel has the same meaning as that in Mark.

After the healing of the withered hand and the subsequent plot to kill Jesus (12:9–14), Matthew inserts some special material consisting of the quotation of Isa 42:1–4 (12:15–21) and an account of Jesus healing a demonised man who was blind and dumb (12:22–23), which becomes the occasion for the Pharisees to voice their opinion, ‘this man does not cast out demons except by Beelzeboul, the prince of demons’ (12:25, οὗτος οὐκ ἐκβάλλει τὰ δαιμόνια εἰ μὴ ἐν τῷ Βεελζεβούλ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων).

By citing Isaiah 42:1–4, the narrative reminds the reader that Jesus is the Servant of the Lord (cf. baptism, 3:13–17; healing ministry, 8:17 = Isa 53:4). After reporting some healings, the command to silence (12:15–16) becomes the opportunity to quote Isaiah 42:1, the first of the Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12; 61). Matthew explains Jesus’ silencing those he healed as a fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy about the quiet ministry of the Servant.

The quotation also helps to set the agenda of the narrative and is pivotal for Matthew’s narrative flow. Matthew’s Gospel begins with a genealogy linking the Christ with the history of Israel (1:1–17). It ends with the gospel of Israel’s Messiah going out into the nations (28:16–20). How does Israel’s Messiah come to be making disciples from the nations of the world? Half-way through the narrative, the ‘until’ clause of this quotation (vv.20–21, cf. 18) set up an expectation that will guide the reading of the subsequent narrative. This gentle Servant’s presence within Israel is ‘until ...’, that is, it has a goal in view. This goal is the end to which the narrative is heading, namely, that justice will be cast out to the nations, and in his name the nations will hope. Since ‘justice’ speaks of the restoration of all things to conform to God’s design, this looks ahead to the coming kingdom of heaven, which both John and Jesus have already announced as being near (3:1; 4:17). The nations without hope will hope in Israel’s Messiah. The Gentiles, who dwell in darkness and under the shadow of death (4:12–17), will see the light of the Servant (see Isaiah 49:6). The Servant’s ministry will come to an end when the nations have received justice and hope in him (see 28:18–20).

The gentle activity of the Servant is evidently the point of correspondence between the promised activity of the Servant, and Jesus’ command to silence (v.17). His ministry is not to create a public disturbance. But, despite its gentle operation, this ministry will be relentless until justice comes to the nations, and the restoration of all things occurs in the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth (Isaiah 65). As the servant gets about his ministry, ‘the nations will hope in his name’ (v.21).

In the next scene, Jesus heals a demonised man who is blind and mute (12:22–23), causing the crowd to ask whether he is the Son of David, that is, the Messiah (cf. 2 Samuel 7). The Pharisees, however,

offer another alternative (v.24), accusing him of being a magician, that is, of manipulating the prince of demons to produce his exorcisms. Basically following Mark,²⁴ Matthew reports that Jesus firstly questions their interpretation of the events by asking a series of parabolic questions (vv.25–27), before providing his own interpretation. Before reaching the ‘strong man’ parable (v.29), however, Matthew inserts a dramatic saying linking Jesus’ action against the demons with the Spirit of God and the imminence of the Kingdom of God: ‘If by the Spirit of God, I cast out *daimons*, then the kingdom of God has come upon you’ (12:28, εἰ δὲ ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ ἐγὼ ἐκβάλλω τὰ δαιμόνια, ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ).

This partial syllogism consists of an assumption and a conclusion. In order for the logic to drive towards the conclusion, the hearer is required to supply the missing ‘middle term’ (or ‘minor premise’), which must propose some kind of relationship between the Spirit and the Kingdom, if the logic is going to work.

This has been a key verse in discussions about the kingdom of heaven. It has been used to establish that the kingdom is somehow present in Jesus’ ministry as a ‘force’ or ‘power’. On this view, the exorcisms are regarded as the kingdom powerfully present. The missing middle term on this scenario has been stated to be, ‘where the Spirit is, there is the kingdom’.²⁵ So, exorcisms are by the Spirit, and because the Kingdom is where the Spirit is, therefore the Kingdom is upon you.

However, it is better to understand this verse more in the light of prophetic expectations. According to Daniel, the kingdom is not a force or anything abstract, but a concrete reality, a changed state of affairs (Dan 2:44). It is when God’s kingdom replaces all ungodly power. It is given to the Son of Man (Dan 7:13–14), who then shares it with the saints (Dan 7:15–28). In the flow of Daniel’s narrative, it is associated with the resurrection from the dead (Daniel 12). In the flow

²⁴ Alongside the more minor differences, Matthew’s version adds the question of verse 27.

²⁵ Dunn, for example, makes much of this slogan in ‘Spirit and Kingdom’, although the expression was coined in 1888 by H. Gunkel. See Turner, ‘The Significance of receiving the Spirit in Luke-Acts: A survey of Modern Scholarship’, 133.

of Old Testament expectation, at an earlier stage it was Isaiah's Suffering Servant who would bring in a radical new deal for Israel and then for the nations (described in Isaiah 54–66). By the time of Daniel, this radical new deal is described in terms of God setting up his kingdom, which will be given to the Son of Man.

In Matthew's distant and immediate context, it is the Servant of the Lord who operates 'by the Spirit of God' (3:16–17; 12:18–21 = Isaiah 42:1–4). The immediate proximity of the Isaiah 42 quotation means that its reference to the Spirit of the Servant naturally informs and fills out the mention of the Spirit in 12:28 and 31–32. This enables a different middle term to be supplied to Jesus' partial syllogism. With the middle term something like: 'the Spirit-equipped Servant will be the one to bring in the kingdom', the logic of the statement is as follows. If the Servant of the Lord is operating within Israel (as Jesus' exorcisms by virtue of the Spirit clearly demonstrate), **since** the Servant's ministry is the necessary preparation for the coming of the Kingdom, then the kingdom of God has become imminent indeed. It has 'come upon you'.

Jesus reinforces his teaching by using a parable. His exorcisms are like the binding of a strong man (v.29), which is necessary to release the tyrant's captives. Even this parable (drawn from Mark 3:27) alludes to the ministry of the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 49:24–25). The binding of the strong man is part of the preparation for the coming of the kingdom of God.

With this salvation-historical perspective in view, Jesus then issues a strong warning to those who have misattributed the source of his ministry. If the Servant is already operating within Israel, and the kingdom of God is just around the corner, then it is important for Israel to stand with him, rather than against him, for it is the time for harvest, not for scattering (12:30, cf. 9:37–38). This was the only decision that Israel had to make at this crucial moment in their history. Israel's supreme moment of crisis has arrived: what will they decide about Jesus?

It is at this point that Matthew's blasphemy saying is inserted (12:31–32) and, by Matthew's addition of διὰ τοῦτο, it is specifically and causally tied to the need to be for or against Jesus: 'because of the need to choose to be with me or against me, ...'. This indicates that the saying therefore has a Christological focus. It is designed to

provoke a decision about Jesus, by referring to the consequences of making the wrong choice and urging them to respond to him positively.

The ‘blasphemy against the spirit’ saying has puzzled many, especially given Matthew’s additional version of it (v.32). However, as hinted already, both versions of the saying can be readily understood in the same salvation-historical context assumed by Mark and so readily clarified and reinforced by Matthew’s context.

As already noted, ‘the Spirit’ is placed upon the Servant (v.18), to equip him for his ministry of bringing justice to the nations by way of the forgiveness of sins. This means that the first part of Matthew’s saying (v.31) should be understood in exactly the same sense as explained above for Mark’s version: the blasphemy against the Spirit is a failure to recognise that Jesus is the Servant, equipped by God, operating within Israel in the nation’s last days before the end. As Servant of the Lord, he is the one who brings forgiveness to the land (9:6). If the Israelites fail to place themselves on Jesus’ side (v.30), then they will miss out on the forgiveness the Servant has come to bring about.

Matthew then provides a second form of the saying (v.32), which, even though it has proved a little difficult to understand,²⁶ simply reinforces this point. One of the major puzzles associated with this second form is simply put: Why is it more serious to blaspheme the Holy Spirit than to speak a word against the Son of Man?

Some answers to this question rely upon an older understanding of the ascription ‘Son of Man’ as referring to Christ’s humanity, as opposed to his divinity.²⁷ The reference to the Holy Spirit is then taken to refer to Jesus’ divinity, the Pharisees thus eliciting his charge of blasphemy when they attributed Jesus’ divine authority to Satan.²⁸ On this view, Jesus is referring to himself at the time of his speaking,

²⁶ See, for example, Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.348: ‘as it stands, Mt 12:32 has no obvious meaning. Perhaps we have here an example of a saying whose Greek form misrepresents the Aramaic original. Because the sayings of Jesus were regarded as authoritative, some of the more obscure ones just might have been passed on out of respect for the tradition, even when they were not comprehended. On the other hand, one wonders whether Matthew, who so consistently eliminated the obscurities of Mark, would have included such in his Gospel. We remain stumped’.

²⁷ This view may lie behind Dumbrell’s comment that ‘the deity of the Son of Man was not generally recognized at that stage’ (Dumbrell, *New Covenant*, 53), although this is also capable of a more salvation-historical reading, in line with that articulated below.

²⁸ Mahoney, ‘Blasphemy’, 62.

when his true identity is more easily overlooked under his present lowly state in human form. Presumably a word spoken against him is therefore more excusable because of the necessary ignorance thrust upon people by his incarnation. On the other hand, for the logic to work, the power displayed in his exorcisms must clearly signal his deity. To misattribute this power is therefore culpable in the face of the apparently clear revelation of his true person.²⁹

A variant of this reading helpfully introduces a salvation-historical perspective. Still referring to Jesus' humanity, couldn't the ascription 'Son of Man' point to the state of Jesus' humble position at the time he was speaking, and couldn't the reference to the Holy Spirit look forward to the post-Pentecost period, after the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2)? Again, as Davies and Allison articulate it: Those who rejected Jesus the Son of Man in his earthly ministry would be forgiven for that sin, but they would not be forgiven, if they spoke against the Holy Spirit in the Post-Pentecost days.³⁰

It is, however, the contention of this article that a better reading arises from what appears to be a complete reversal of this perspective. The 'Son of Man' and 'the Holy Spirit' certainly need to be understood with reference to different stages of salvation history. However, these two ascriptions do not refer, respectively, to the present (in Jesus' ministry) and the future (in the post-Pentecost period), but to the future and to the present — that is, the movement of the saying needs to be understood in a manner exactly opposite that of the previous suggestion.

In the original prophecy, 'one like a son of man' (Daniel 7:13–14) comes to the Ancient of Days where he received the Kingdom of God (cf. Dan 2:44). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus uses the ascription 'Son of Man' of himself, and he always has the Daniel 7:13–14 context in view. When placed into the context of Jesus' ministry, the 'coming of the Son of Man' refers to the moment of his exaltation,

²⁹ As Davies and Allison put it: 'Opposition to Jesus perceived as only a man is forgivable, but opposition to the Holy Spirit and its [sic] workings is not. i.e sin born of ignorance can be pardoned, but wilful sin cannot be'; Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.347. Or McKnight, 'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', 68: 'While Jesus contends that one might miss the revelation of God in his lowly person (Matt 12:32a), no one can miss the power of God at work in his ability to exorcize demons (Matt 12:32b; Mark 3:29). [...] Thus, the unforgivable sin is repudiation of the work of God, seen in Jesus' powerful acts of exorcism'.

³⁰ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.347.

when he receives the Kingdom from the Father after his resurrection. This is confirmed by the final scene of the Gospel, which uses Daniel 7 language to report that Jesus has been given ‘all authority on heaven and earth’ (28:18), that is, when he has become the Son of Man.

With this framework in mind, the reference to the ‘Son of Man’ in the second blasphemy saying (12:32) can be read as a flash-forward to the end of the Gospel, to the period after he has been installed as the glorious Son of Man. The time of potential utterance is, however, still present. Since at this moment in Jesus’ ministry the Son of Man has not come to the Father to receive the kingdom, a word uttered against him will be forgiven, because he is not yet manifest in his glorious position.

But it is a different matter for words spoken against the ‘Holy Spirit’. The ‘Holy Spirit’ refers to the Servant, since the Servant receives the Spirit in order to fulfil his ministry (vv.18–21; Isaiah 42:1–4). A word spoken against the Spirit refers to speaking against what is going on in Jesus’ ministry to Israel at that time. The ‘works of the Messiah’ (11:2) have been so clearly displayed that even Gentiles could see (8:1ff). The Pharisees were condemning him, accusing him, seeking to destroy him, attributing his work of the Spirit to the prince of demons. They were speaking against the Servant of the Lord. This is dangerous, because it is the Servant who brings forgiveness to Israel (cf. 6:12, 14, 15; 9:6; 18:21, 35; 26:28). If they reject him, they reject the forgiveness he brings. The special time they are in, that is, as ‘this generation’ (11:16; 12:39, 41, 42, 45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:16; 24:34)—the generation of the Messiah—, seems to make them all the more culpable. If they do not receive him, they miss forgiveness in this age and the next. This is a very severe prospect that Jesus warns them against. And, of course, this is a gracious warning, because if they heeded it and received his ministry for what it truly was, then their future would be very different indeed.

3. Luke

The context of the saying in Luke is slightly different to that in Mark and Matthew. Luke reports the Beelzeboul controversy (11:14–23), but the blasphemy saying comes much later (12:10), after a great deal of intervening material.

In its immediate context, Jesus warns a large crowd to be on guard against the influence of the Pharisees (12:1), clearly referring to

the context of opposition which prevailed at that time. This potential danger may necessitate concealment and ‘whispering in the ear’, but Jesus assures the crowd that one day there will be open proclamation of the things he was teaching them (12:2–3; cf. 24:47–48, and then Acts). He tells them not to be afraid of those who can kill the body only, but to fear God, who values them greatly (12:4–7). He adds the assurance and warning that the one who acknowledges him before men will be acknowledged by the Son of Man before the angels, but the one who disowns him will be disowned by the Son of Man before the angels (12:8–9; cf. 15:10). Luke’s version of the ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ follows immediately (12:10).

Some argue that the more extended context changes the setting and so the meaning of the saying. Whereas in Mark and Matthew, the saying warns the Jewish leaders, Luke places it in the context of ‘testimony under constraint’, that is, ‘it is believers brought before the authorities who will be pressed to blaspheme in this way’ (12:8–10), and—pulling back a saying that Mark has in his apocalyptic discourse (Mark 13:9–11)—those who don’t are protected by a promise (12:11–12).³¹

It is important, however, to notice that the context is best described not simply as Jesus’ appeal to his disciples to give bold testimony to him in some perilous times in the far-off future. Instead, Jesus is speaking of the current time, for the Pharisees were a present danger to both himself and his audience. In this present situation, testimony of both kinds can be found, for some were acknowledging and some disowning him.

Like Matthew, Luke also clearly shows that the coming of Jesus Christ brought a crisis to first-century Israel. Later Jesus will speak of Israel being like a fruitless fig tree, granted a stay of execution, in order to see if there will be any change (13:6–9). At the end of Luke 12 (vv.54–59), Jesus calls upon the crowds to understand the present time in which they stood. They can read the weather, why can’t they read the signs and see that God’s judgement is just about to fall and that the nation is living on borrowed time?

As in Matthew, Jesus speaks of first-century Israel as ‘this generation’, those who stand in a unique place in human history as

³¹ Levison, ‘Holy Spirit’, 292.

those amongst whom the Messiah has finally come (11:29–32; 11:50–51; see also: 7:31; 9:41; 16:8; 17:25; 21:32; Acts 2:40; 8:33). And his coming has provoked a crisis of leadership, as well as a crisis of discipleship. Who is really in charge? Who should Israel really follow? This crisis presented Israel with a decision about the present time, versus the future time; this world, or the next; the world they knew so well, or the kingdom of the Son of Man. They had to choose one or the other, what would it be? This meant division within Israel. As the prophet Micah predicted for the last days, Israel would be divided down to the level of individual family members, being against each other. And, said Jesus, this time has now come, now that the Messiah was here (12:49–53; cf. Mic 7).

By this stage in Luke's narrative, Jesus had begun to feel the effects of this division himself. As soon as he began his ministry (Luke 4:16–30), he was rejected by his home town. Despite his mighty works and marvellous teaching, Israel had not welcomed him as their Messiah, and just before Luke 12, the situation had come to a head. Jesus had been accused of operating by Beelzeboul (11:14–23). After cleansing the land of the unclean spirit, as the Messiah was expected to do, in a parable based upon exorcism he warned his hearers about the danger of misunderstanding him (11:24–26, cf. Zech 13:2), and the need to hear and embrace the word he was proclaiming (11:27–28). He spoke of the current generation of Israelites as an evil generation, whose only sign would be that of Jonah (11:29–32), and, once again, urged the need to take care in listening to him (11:33–36). He castigated the Pharisees and lawyers, pronouncing a long list of woes (11:37–52), and, in response, the Pharisees and scribes deliberately began to seek to catch him in his words (11:53–54). This is why he warns his hearers against them (12:1). This is the context of his blasphemy saying (12:10). The Messiah as Servant is in their midst. Some are confessing him, and some are denying him. It is a context that is fraught, as decisions are being made about Jesus and the stakes are high.

As in Matthew, Luke's version opposes a word against the Son of Man, with one against the Holy Spirit. Does the above explanation proposed for Matthew also work for Luke? Certainly the one event that now dominates Israel's horizon is the coming of the Son of Man, and Jesus calls upon his hearers to be ready for that moment (12:40).

In Daniel 7, in the context of judgement, the Son of Man came to the Father and received the kingdom to reign over forever. And if the coming of the Son of Man is soon, it is no surprise that Jesus also urges his hearers to seek the coming Kingdom of God (Luke 12:31), as if it is the treasure their heart truly longed for (vv.21, 34).

This eschatological horizon also dominates the context immediately following the blasphemy saying. In the parable of the rich fool (12:13–21), Jesus urges his hearers not to find their security in the things of this world, but to be rich towards God instead (v.21). Rather than being anxious about the things that sustain life in this world—what they eat, drink, and wear—he urges them to seek his kingdom (vv.22–33). These are exactly the things that can be removed from you by those who are in power in this world (cf. 12:4). But all of that is about to change.

This is the urgent times in which they existed. Jesus has come and he has come to cast fire on the earth/ land (12:49), and this will divide Israel down the middle (12:53). Small wonder they are already experiencing opposition from the Pharisees (11:53–54). But his disciples need to be aware that this division is a necessary part of Israel’s last days. And with their eyes on the great God who is on their side, and their eyes fixed on his kingdom, while they await the coming of the Son of Man, they have no need to fear those who can only take away their lives or their livelihood. And as for the wider circle of Israelites, ‘this generation’ needs to recognise the ‘something greater’ (11:31–32) who is in their midst and therefore recognise the times (12:54–59); the time of judgement is about to arrive; the Son of Man is coming (12:40), and so Israel needs to be ready. The big questions of life boil down to just one: will the Son of Man find faith in the land [of Israel] when he comes (18:8)?

This is the setting in which the ‘blasphemy’ saying finds its meaning (12:10). Jesus’ parallels and contrasts reinforce the point that a person’s response to him in the present time will have implications for the time to come (12:8–9). The one who acknowledges him in the midst of last days’ Israel, will be acknowledged in the heavenly context when the Son of Man comes to receive his kingdom (once again, in the exaltation). The one who denies Jesus, manifest in this generation, will be thoroughly denied.

The parallelism with v.9 shows that in v.10 the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is also about denying Jesus. As in Matthew and Mark, the ‘Holy Spirit’ is code for Jesus operating as the Servant of the Lord and the one who blasphemes him will not be forgiven. Forgiveness of sins is a major concern of Luke’s two-part narrative (Luke 1:77; 3:3; 4:18; 5:21, 24; 6:37; 7:49; 11:4; 17:3–4; 23:34; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18), and to misunderstand Jesus’ role as the Servant of the Lord, once again, places the Israelites in danger of missing out on the forgiveness he brings.

As with Matthew’s version, other less satisfactory explanations have been offered. Because Luke wrote a follow-on narrative, interpreters readily turn to the Book of Acts to assist in the interpretation of Luke’s blasphemy saying. So, for example, Johnson argues that the key to Luke’s version is found in Acts 5:32 and 7:51, where leaders ‘resist the Holy Spirit’.³² Others take Luke’s saying as speaking to the situation confronting many Christians in the Roman Empire. To this situation, Jesus’ words are saying that if they were called upon to bow down and worship the emperor, Jesus wouldn’t hold it against them for slandering his name, but if in their heart they deny God, they are slandering the Holy Spirit, that sin can not be forgiven.³³ Others extend the saying to apply to the ministry of the apostles.³⁴ If it is a sin to reject the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Jesus, so it is a sin to reject the Holy Spirit in the ministry of his apostles, generalising that: ‘In summary, we may confidently conclude that the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” is overt, even verbal, repudiation of the presence of God’s Spirit in the ministry of Jesus and those whom he has sent’.³⁵

³² Johnson, *Luke*, 195. Those who oppose the prophets and apostles are slandering the Holy Spirit and yet it is the Holy Spirit who will help the disciples to respond. The discrimination of a word against the Son of Man and a word against the Holy Spirit in the blasphemy saying, ‘accords exactly with the two stages of Luke’s narrative. The denial of Jesus as the prophet in the Gospel can be reversed by conversion to the proclamation by his successors in Acts. But the rejection of *their* proclamation in the Holy Spirit leads to a final rejection from the people. In the narrative of Acts 4–5, Luke will show these words of Jesus finding their fulfilment’, p.197.

³³ Carroll & Carroll, *Preaching*, 74.

³⁴ McKnight, ‘Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’, 68.

³⁵ McKnight, ‘Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’, 68. With this take on the Lukan saying, McKnight follows through into the book of Acts. After the ministry of Jesus and his death, the emphasis on the Spirit as the object of blasphemy gives way to an emphasis on Jesus Christ (James 2:7). So when Paul’s preaching of Christ crucified is repudiated, this, too, appears to be a ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 13:8, 45; 14:2; 18:6; 19:13–16).

However, it is important not to project Jesus' words forward into a time beyond his own. His saying is readily understandable in the setting of his ministry. When Evans refers to the usual salvation-historical divide, in which the Son of Man refers to 'the earthly Jesus' and the Holy Spirit to the post-Pentecost situation when 'it is plainly revealed who he is', his comments show that he feels the strain of the text against this common explanation. Jesus is 'already in his ministry the bearer of the Holy Spirit', and 'if a change from one period of time to another is to be presupposed in the course of a single sentence the tenses of the verbs would suggest that it is in the opposite direction'.³⁶

4. Limitations, Arbitrary or Otherwise?

Davies and Allison's comment on the Matthean version can be generalised to say, 'the history of the interpretation of [Jesus' blasphemy against the Holy Spirit saying] is one of tragic misapprehension'.³⁷ As interpreters have sought to apply this saying to the readers of the Synoptics they have moved it beyond its proper historical and Gospel context, transforming it into some kind of general principle, and/or stressing its character as a state rather than a once-off act, and/or as wilful or persistently performed. At times more careful exegetes have raised a quiet voice to point out that the prevailing opinions did not seem to take the Synoptic context too seriously, but these voices have generally not been heard.³⁸

Jesus warned his Israelite contemporaries not to speak a word against the Holy Spirit, that is, against failing to appreciate his role as the Servant of the Lord, already operating in the midst of that generation. To do so would be to miss the forgiveness that the Servant's ministry was to bring about. A word against the Son of Man, at that stage, would be forgivable, since the Son of Man would not come to the Father to receive the kingdom until the resurrection/

³⁶ Evans, *Luke*, 518.

³⁷ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.348.

³⁸ Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 2.348, note that Jerome (*Ep.* 42) pointed out that what became the dominant idea in church history—that it is the 'sin unto death' of 1 John 5:16, that is, post-conversion relapse (Origen, *De prin.* 1.3.7)—did not take the Synoptic context too seriously, because there it is unbelievers who are running the risk, but Jerome's exegesis did not prevail. Augustine (*Serm.* 71) argued that it is impenitence that lasted until death, resistance of the Spirit throughout one's life, and this interpretation 'which made blasphemy against the Spirit not a specific act but a state of enmity, and one possible for Christians, became quite influential'.

exaltation. But there was ample evidence already that the Servant of the Lord was operative in their midst, and Israel rejected that evidence at peril of missing out on forgiveness and therefore remaining ‘guilty of eternal sin’.

Later readers of the Gospels should not extract this saying out of its original historical and Gospel context, but should read it as an integral part of the three Synoptics in which it is embedded. In this setting, with the blasphemy against the Spirit saying, Jesus warns Israel to recognise and respond to him properly. Later Gospel readers have even more of his story—and it is now complete. All mysteries are now disclosed about Jesus, for the Servant has played out his ministry, the Son of Man has received his kingdom, and he now reigns at the right hand of the Father until all his enemies are placed beneath his feet (cf. 1 Cor 15:24–26). Now that we look back on the Servant’s ministry, and back on the moment that the Son of Man received the kingdom and the forgiveness of sins began to be proclaimed even to the nations, it would certainly be remiss to speak a word against Jesus, when he is the only source of our forgiveness.

This saying does not represent an arbitrary limit to God’s forgiveness. Because forgiveness is located in the person and work of Jesus Christ, for a person to misunderstand him and explain him as something he is not, they are automatically removed from forgiveness. If, at any time, they come to their senses and recognise him for who he truly is, then they embrace forgiveness as they embrace him. This is not arbitrary, but logical and necessary, for forgiveness of sins is found only in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Appendix: Saying in Its Gospel Contexts

Comparison with Mark’s sequencing.

| Matthew | Mark | Luke |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| 12:9–14 Jesus Heals the withered hand | 3:1–6 Jesus Heals the withered hand | |
| | 3:7–12 Crowds violently press on Jesus | [6:17–19] |
| | 3:13–19 Jesus names the Twelve | 6:12–16 Jesus names the Twelve |
| | | 6:20–49 Sermon on Plain [Q] 7:1–10 Centurion’s |

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| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | | Servant [Q] |
| | | 7:11-17 Widow of Nain's son [L] 7:18-35 John the Baptist's Question [Q] 7:36-50 Sinful Woman anoints Jesus [L] 8:1-4 Women follow Jesus [L] 8:5-18 Parables Discourse |
| -- | 3:20-21 Jesus' family seek to bring him home | -- |
| 12:15-21 The Servant of the Lord 12:22-23 Jesus heals a demon-possessed blind & dumb man | | -- 11:14 Jesus heals a demon-possessed dumb man |
| 12:24 Pharisees accuse Jesus of operating by Beelzeboul | 3:22 Jerusalem scribes accuse Jesus of operating by Beelzeboul | 11:15 some accuse Jesus of operating by Beelzeboul |
| | | 11:16 others ask for sign from heaven |
| 12:25-26 How can Satan be divided? | 3:23-26 How can Satan be divided? | 11:17-18 How can Satan be divided? |
| 12:27 By whom do your followers drive them out? 12:28 the kingdom of God has come upon you | | 11:19 By whom do your followers drive them out? 11:20 the kingdom of God has come upon you |
| 12:29 strong man parable | 3:27 strong man parable | 11:21-22 strong man parable |
| 12:30 who is not with me is against me | | 11:23 who is not with me is against me |
| | | 11:24-26 Unclean Spirit returns [Q] 11:27-28 Blessed is your mother! [L] 11:29-32 Sign of Jonah |

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| | | [Q] 11:33–36 Parable of the Lamp 11:37–54 Woe to Pharisees [Q] 12:1–4 What is hidden will be revealed 12:5–7 Fear not man, but God 12:8–12 Acknowledge the Son of Man |
| 12:31 Blasphemy against Holy Spirit 12:32 Elaboration by contrast with word spoken against the Son of man | 3:38–29 Blasphemy against Holy Spirit | -- 12:10 blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, contrast with word spoken against Son of man |
| 12:33–3 Careless words will be judged 12:38–42 Pharisees ask for a sign 12:43–45 The parable of the unclean spirit: the evil generation | | -- [11:16, 29–32 Pharisees ask for a sign] [11:24–26 Parable of the unclean spirit: this generation] |
| [12:46–50 Jesus’ family] | 3:31–35 Jesus committed to the will of God | [8:19–21 Jesus’ Family] |
| | | 12:13–21 Parable of the Rich Fool [L] |

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