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BOOK REVIEW

VERGEVING: VERKENNINGEN RONDOM EEN DELICAAAT THEMA

Peels, H.G.L. (ed.), (APELDOORNE STUDIES NR 76, 2020), 125 pp. Price: € 15,95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-90-75847-53-6. bestellen@tua.nl

Vergeving is an exciting compilation of essays on the topic of forgiveness. A glance at the contributors showcases various theological perspectives, interests, and lived experiences from The Netherlands. From my South African perspective, I endeavoured the reading of *Vergeving* with some restraint in expectation. After all, the contextual realities between The Netherlands and South Africa are merely divergent. From a theological perspective, it is undoubtedly vital to contemplate forgiveness regarding relationality with the divine, with the other, and with oneself. However, when situated in the South African reality – with an incomplete reconciliation process, resentment among the youth (from various perspectives, with a myriad of reasoning), governmental corruption, and weak civil institutions – is the contemplation on forgiveness helpful? Stated differently, what avenues does *Vergeving* open for newness entering the South African context of polarisation towards the well-being of human co-existence?

In my reading of *Vergeving*, three important avenues come to the fore: forgiveness and the divine, forgiveness and the self, and forgiveness and the other.

Peels' chapter regarding forgiveness in the book of Jeremiah thoroughly contemplates forgiveness and the divine (pp.19-33). He opines that God's forgiveness exists within the paradox of love and holiness (p.20), with the premise that God desires to forgive (p.24). However, in Israel's persistence in evil, it is not that God does not desire to forgive, but that God cannot forgive (p.25). Even this is not the final word for the book of Jeremiah. There is a change in rhetoric from the earlier chapters of Jeremiah to the later chapters. Herein, Peels showcases that God's very being transcends the impossibility of forgiveness because of Israel's acts. "Het motief achter deze goddelijke vergeving ligt [...] alleen in Gods eigen hart" (p.28). He quotes Brueggemann to underscore this point: "[God is] 'incapable of not having a relationship with Israel'" (p.28). In a similar vein, but focusing on Romans 3:25, Mulder considers the relationship of forgiveness and God's righteousness as inseparable in the biblical narrative (pp.35-46). Mulder's central point is this: In Christ, it is not sin that is forgiven, but rather the complete person of faith is forgiven, because the complete person of Christ died as "verzoendeksel" (pp.45-46).

This brings me to the second avenue, forgiveness and the self. In conversation with Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Van Rossum (pp.9-17) locates in the character of Alyosha, the monk, the correct posture of the Christian person. After all, in the novel, even the monk is found in his human fallibility (p.15). In the context of the complexity of relationships within the novel, Van Rossum makes the following important remark with regard to understanding ourselves *vis-à-vis* forgiveness:

vergeving kán ter sprake gebracht worden in onze tijd, zeker, maar alleen in het besef dat ook de aardappel van óns leven vanbinnen door en door verrot is. Wij zijn er ook één van Karamazov (p.16).

To my mind, Van Rossum interrogates our maturity in accordance with our understanding as persons in the face of God. Finding ourselves in the complexity of human relationships – where injustices have been done against us, and we have done injustices against others – it is only in handing over judgement to God (p.17) that a correct understanding of ourselves is forged. From a different perspective, but in the avenue of forgiveness and the self, Boerke contemplates Luther's understanding of forgiveness in Matthew 9:1-8 (pp.61-72). Boerke proposes that forgiveness is only possible where there is sin (p.72). Admission of guilt is, therefore, a prerequisite for forgiveness (p.72).

Finally, forgiveness and the other. To my surprise, there is indeed some contemplation on the South African situation. However, the comments are offhand and do not thoroughly engage with the South African realities. On the one hand, the perspective from The Netherlands is indeed helpful as an

outsider perspective. On the other hand, there is a lack of lived experience within the South African context, which implies important limitations, especially regarding contextualisation.

Nonetheless, Brouwer contemplates the South African situation and argues that there is no possibility of a life together for White and Black people, unless forgiveness takes place (p.48). Furthermore, forgiveness must be the forgiveness of all sins; forgiveness and prayer go hand in hand, and without forgiveness, the relationship with God is compromised (p.48). Brouwer also contemplates forgiveness in the parable of the merciless slave (pp.52-57) and the words of Jesus on the cross (pp.57-58). In both instances, Brouwer underscores the previous points, namely no possibility of living together without forgiveness and forgiveness cannot be without prayer. Brouwer concludes that the Christian's relationship with God and Christ's death on the cross make complete forgiveness possible to the other (p.58), as well as the warning that those who do not forgive their neighbour wholeheartedly stand under the wrath of God (p.59). In a more nuanced contemplation of forgiveness and the other, Steensma contemplates interpersonal forgiveness (pp.89-107). Some essential aspects: forgiveness is scarce in contemporary culture (p.98); forgiveness always follows when interpersonal relations have been compromised (p.93); there are limitations to forgiveness, including the possibility of not forgiving (pp.94-96); forgiveness is expected if the other shows repentance (pp.96-100); the Christian attitude in a new relationship with God compels a new relation to others, in forgiveness (pp.100-102); the well-being of society is interlocked with both forgiveness and recognition of fault (pp.102-104), and forgiveness can be given without repentance beforehand (pp.104-106). Finally, Steensma concludes with the essential theological insight that renewed interpersonal relationships are, in their essence, a gift that must be cherished for the well-being of society (p.106).

There are at least two shortcomings in *Vergeving*, from my perspective. First, there is no adequate contemplation on what sin is, especially in the contextual realities. Forgiveness only occurs after a transgression. There are certainly reflections on sin from a historical perspective, such as in Peels' article on Jeremiah, and there are presumptions about sin regarding sociopolitical injustices. How is sin conceptualised in our contemporary context? Is it not also important to consider the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the larger structure? When could actions rightly be considered sin, and when should they not be considered sin?

Finally, the contextualisation of *Vergeving* leaves much to the imagination. On the one hand, especially regarding the book's intentions – to theologically contemplate forgiveness – understandably, contextualisation comes short. On the other hand, however, there is (and should be) a strong(er) impetus towards

contextualisation within the larger theological debate. We live and exist in the messiness of human reality, and theology should assist in solving the problems that afflict our societies. The complexity of the issue of forgiveness is important and well enacted in *Vergeving*. However, thorough and workable theological avenues for the improvement of human well-being seem to evade the conversation.

All in all, *Vergeving* is an excellent compilation of essays on forgiveness and should undoubtedly be considered a brief guide on the topic of forgiveness on the bookshelf of the theologian.