

Divine Forgiveness in the Major Prophets¹

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ABSTRACT

There is a perception that the major prophetic books focus on God’s judgment while the New Testament (NT) focuses on God’s forgiveness. Although several prophetic passages refer to divine judgment, there are other references describing a God who is willing to forgive his people. Different terms and phrases are used to describe forgiveness in the Old Testament (OT), but scholars agree that divine forgiveness is expressed primarily by the term סלח. This article focuses on the seven occurrences of סלח in the major prophets, once in Isaiah (Isa 55:7) and six times in Jeremiah (Jer 5:1, 7; 31:34; 33:8; 36:3; and 50:20). There is a concentration of סלח references in two OT contexts: (1) the prayer literature; and (2) the Priestly literature of the Pentateuch. The סלח references in the major prophets do not follow the same pattern. All the references in Isaiah and Jeremiah are found outside the prayer literature. One finds no reference in Ezekiel despite its relationship to the Priestly tradition. The major prophets convey the following concerning the nature of forgiveness: (1) The possibility of forgiveness is questioned or denied because of the worship of foreign gods; (2) In some instances repentance is seen as a pre-condition for forgiveness; (3) Forgiveness is an essential feature of the new covenant and the days of restoration; (4) Forgiveness is a matter in which God takes the initiative. He wants to break the vicious cycle of sin and punishment; (5) Forgiveness is dependent upon the grace of God.

A INTRODUCTION

The question may be posed: Does the concept of divine forgiveness play a role in the prophetic books? There is a perception that the OT, especially the prophetic books, speaks about God’s judgment and wrath while the NT speaks about divine love and forgiveness. Claus Westermann says: “Hence it is a gross distortion of truth, when, as still happens, Old and New Testament are set in opposition and the former is said to speak of God’s wrath, the latter of His mercy.”²

¹ A shorter version of this article was delivered as a paper at the OTSSA Conference hosted by the University of Western Cape, Bellville (7-9 Sept. 2011).

² Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 121.

Unfortunately there are some OT scholars who strengthen this “distortion of truth.” Lalleman-de Winkel³ refers to these scholars by saying: “To several scholars, as we will see below, the pre-exilic prophets were in fact messengers of doom. They proclaimed judgment in the first place. This judgment was unconditional, it could not be escaped.”

It is true that the themes of judgment, punishment and obedience occur in the major prophetic books,⁴ but that is not the only focus. The prophetic books also refer to the restoration of Israel, hope, salvation and forgiveness. This article will investigate the occurrence and nature of divine forgiveness in the major prophetic books.

B TERMS AND PHRASES CONVEYING THE CONCEPT OF FORGIVENESS IN THE MAJOR PROPHETS

The concept of divine forgiveness in the OT has various dimensions and is expressed in many Hebrew terms and phrases. Divine forgiveness in the Old Testament is expressed primarily by the term סלח. In all instances, God is the subject of the verb and its derivatives. This term occurs neither in secular usage nor in expressing forgiveness between human beings.⁵ The root סלח occurs 50 times in the OT: 33 times in the *qal* form; 13 times in the *nip’al* form, once as adjective (Ps 85:5) and three times as a noun (Neh 9:17; Ps 130:4; Dan 9:9). The סלח references occur primarily in three contexts: the priestly literature, the prayer literature and the prophetic literature. The term סלח occurs seven times in the major prophets, once in Isaiah (Isa 55:7) and six times in Jeremiah (Jer 5:1, 7; 31:34; 33:8; 36:3; and 50:20). This article will focus on divine forgiveness as expressed by the term סלח.

There are a few terms and phrases related to the term סלח. None of these terms are used only in reference to divine forgiveness. Apart from סלח the terms נשא (to lift, to bear away, forgive) and כפר (cover, atone, forgive) are the two most important. The following other terms and phrases occur in the major prophetic books: רפא - to heal or restore; לא זכר - never to remember (sin); רחם - to love, give mercy; טהר - to purify, clean; מחה - to erase, wipe away (sin,

³ Hetty Lalleman-de Winkel, *Jeremiah in Prophetic Tradition: An Examination of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions* (CBET 26, Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 85.

⁴ The “major prophetic books” refer to the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Some scholars may differ from this. Redditt in his recent introduction also discusses the following books under the heading “The major prophets:” Lamentations and other Deutero-Jeremiatic literature and Daniel. Cf. Paul L. Redditt, *Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁵ Johann J. Stamm, “סלח - vergeben,” *THAT* 2:150-160; Jutta Hausmann, “סלח,” *ThWAT* 5:860-868; John S. Kselman, “Forgiveness: Old Testament,” *ABD* 2:831-833; Johannes P. J. Olivier, “סלח,” *NIDOTTE* 3:259-264.

transgression); סור עון – to depart or turn away (from sin); רצה – to be paid off; סבל – to bear (sin); נחם (*nip’al*) - be sorry, move to pity, have compassion, to be comforted, change one’s mind).⁶

C סלח REFERENCE IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

I have mentioned that the term סלח appears only in two prophetic books, namely Isaiah and Jeremiah. Only one reference occurs in Isaiah (Isa 55:7). Deutero-Isaiah⁷ prophesied at one of the most hopeful moments in the history of Israel and Judah. These chapters are filled with the expectation of a new era to be inaugurated by Cyrus of Persia.⁸ The older prophetic materials are concerned with negative threats against Judah, but the text of Deutero-Isaiah portrays primarily a dispute with false gods and not with Judah.⁹ Deutero-Isaiah directs the attention of the community beyond tragedy to the restoration of a vital faith community.¹⁰

Isaiah 55:1-13 may be regarded as a literary unit and can be divided into two or three smaller segments: vv. 1-5, 6-13 (or 6-11, 12-13).¹¹ This passage is part of the epilogue of Deutero-Isaiah where the exiles are invited to share in God’s salvation. Verses 6-11 comprises an exhortation of the prophet (vv. 6-7) followed by a self-referential pronouncement of God which motivates the appeal of the prophet (vv. 8-11). The tone is strongly homiletic.¹² In Isa 55:6-7 the style of address returns to that of the dominant imperative mode, this time through the mouth of the prophet. There is a contrast between the ways and thoughts of humans (v. 7) and the thoughts and ways of God (v. 8).¹³ Verse 7 reads as follows: “Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their

⁶ Daniel F. O’Kennedy & Johannes P. J. Olivier, “Die Konsep Vergifnis in die Ou Testament,” *NGTT* 37/4 (1996): 498-500.

⁷ Most modern scholars use the term Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah when referring to chs. 40-55. However, one must be aware that there is no scholarly consensus on this matter. A respected scholar like Sweeney argues that the synchronic literary structure of the book includes two basic parts, Isa 1-33 and 34-66. Cf. Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 48-49.

⁸ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 381.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (vol. 1 of *Isaiah*; WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁰ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 7.

¹¹ See several scholars: Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 177; John N. Oswalt, *Chapters 40-66* (vol. 2 of *The Book of Isaiah*; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 432; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 431-433. Goldingay and Payne believe that Isa 54:17b forms the beginning of this literary unit. Cf. John Goldingay & David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55* (vol. 2; ICC; London: T & T Clark, 2006), 363.

¹² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2002), 371.

¹³ Childs, *Isaiah*, 437.

thoughts; let them return (שוב) to the Lord, that he may have mercy (רחם) on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly¹⁴ pardon. (סלה)¹⁵"

Some commentators (Stamm and Westermann) regard v. 7 as an interpolation by a pious reader on the grounds that it seems to set conditions for the operation of divine forgiveness. Stamm¹⁶ excludes it from the vocabulary of Deutero-Isaiah and Westermann¹⁷ believes that it is out of place with the rest of Deutero-Isaiah's proclamation. This hypothesis may be true, but one can argue that v. 7 is not at variance with the rest of the prophetic literature. In Jer 5:1 and 36:3 the same pre-condition for divine forgiveness occurs.¹⁸ Perhaps one can say that this verse illustrates something of God's passion. It is a call to the exiles to prepare themselves through personal repentance for the mercy and forgiveness of God.¹⁹

In v. 7 readers find two different words portraying divine forgiveness, רחם (mercy) and סלה (pardon, forgive). The forgiveness is expressed in a strong or intense way ("abundantly pardon"). The *hip'il* imperfect form of the stem רבה (increase) is used together with the *qal* infinitive of the stem סלה. This is the only passage in the entire Hebrew Bible where these two words are used together. The verb רבה can be taken in both a quantitative and qualitative sense and also be related to "serious" sin which requires a great deal of forgiveness.²⁰

Oswalt²¹ argues that the ultimate question in this passage is how sinful humans can live with a holy God. Verse 7 portrays a God who is willing to forgive the wicked, not merely the righteous that stumble and sin. However, there is one pre-condition: the person must first return to Him. Isaiah 55 also describes the way in which the repentance must take place. Verses 6 and 7 emphasise that they must seek God, call unto Him and forsake their wicked thoughts and ways.²² The well-known Hebrew stem שוב (return) is used to

¹⁴ Other translation possibilities are: "ever ready to pardon." Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 7; "he will multiply to pardon" Cf. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 441.

¹⁵ Citations from the NRSV are used in this article, unless mentioned otherwise.

¹⁶ Stamm, *THAT* 2:158.

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1985), 288.

¹⁸ Goldingay emphasises the Jeremianic influence in the context. According to him this influence encouraged the use of the verb סלה rather than other verbs like נשצ or כפר. Cf. John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 553.

¹⁹ Norman R. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 193.

²⁰ Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah 49-55* (vol. 2 of *Isaiah III*; HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 433.

²¹ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 44.

²² Alexander Rofé, "How is the Word Fulfilled? Isaiah 55:6-11 within the Theological Debate of its Time," in *Canon, Theology and Old Testament* (ed. Gene M. Tucker et al.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 253-254.

describe the repentance of the wicked and unrighteous. One must understand this “return” in a broad sense, not merely the return from exile or an individual spiritual return. The “return” to God means to fully embrace the future that God is now offering, a new hope and a new historical possibility.²³ God requires a serious commitment for a new life. The readers become aware of the tension between the reality of God’s permanent commitment and the necessity of human response and repentance.²⁴

Isaiah 55:7 must be read in relationship with its immediate literary context. This verse emphasizes God’s compassion as the basis for a willingness to pardon (vv. 4, 8, 13) as well as emphasising God’s commitment (vv. 4, 8, 17).²⁵ God forgives because he is totally different, His thoughts and ways are not like that of any human being (Isa 55:8). Divine forgiveness is acknowledged as the central act of support without which all other things lose their value.²⁶

Verse 7 can also be linked to other forgiveness passages in Deutero-Isaiah. Isaiah 44:22 refers to divine forgiveness in the perfect tense (“I have swept away your transgressions”); therefore, the appeal to turn was based on the fact that God had already forgiven.²⁷ In Isa 55:7 forgiveness is described in the imperfect tense (“for he will abundantly pardon”). This may be a small grammatical difference, but Goldingay²⁸ believes that it reflects the tension in previous verses. God’s compassion was also mentioned in the perfect tense in Isa 54:8, but in the imperfect in 49:13. Divine forgiveness is both the basis for repentance and the response to repentance.

The plea of Deutero-Isaiah in 55:7 was renewed by the next generation in Isa 59:1-2 where the text emphasizes that the sins of the people set up barriers between themselves and God. They need God’s forgiveness, salvation and righteousness, because his arm is not too short to save.²⁹

D סלח REFERENCES IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The book of Jeremiah represents the culmination of a long editorial interpretive process. The process began in the work of a prophetic personality and

²³ Brueggemann, *Isaiah*, 160; Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 443.

²⁴ Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah*, 551.

²⁵ Goldingay, *Isaiah 40-55*, 553.

²⁶ Olivier, *NIDOTTE* 3:262.

²⁷ Goldingay & Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, 376.

²⁸ Goldingay, *Isaiah 40-55*, 552.

²⁹ Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, 180.

culminated in a theological vision that is influenced by the tradition of the book of Deuteronomy³⁰ and is linked to the prophetic traditions of Hosea.³¹

There are several differences between the Masoretic text of Jeremiah and the Septuagint. The Septuagint version of Jeremiah is much shorter than the Masoretic version, about one-eighth, lacking a number of passages (e.g. 33:14-26) and locates the “oracles against the nations” in a different place. These textual differences do not influence the understanding of divine forgiveness. One finds the forgiveness passages at different locations within the Septuagint,³² but the content of the forgiveness references are the same. There are no major textual “problems” in the forgiveness passages of Jeremiah that have a direct influence on the understanding of divine forgiveness.³³

The Masoretic text³⁴ of Jeremiah may be divided into four major literary units: Judgment over Judah and Jerusalem (Jer 1-25); Incidents in the life of Jeremiah (Jer 26-45); Oracles against other nations (Jer 46-51); Epilogue (Jer 52).³⁵ The סלח references occur in all of these literary units, except the epilogue. Three of the סלח passages occur in poetry (Isa 55:7, Jer 5:1, 7)³⁶ while the other four passages are presented in prose. None of the סלח references is found in the so-called confessions of Jeremiah.³⁷

1 Jeremiah 5:1 and 7

One can say that Jer 1-24 has a more negative tone. McConville³⁸ argues that in Jer 1-24 there could be no hope of salvation for Judah except through the judg-

³⁰ One cannot say that there is general agreement on this matter. A scholar like Holladay disputes Deuteronomistic influence. Cf. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* (vol. 1; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1986.

³¹ Jörg Jeremias, “The Hosea Tradition and the Book of Jeremiah,” *OTE* 7/1 (1994): 21-38; Redditt, *Prophets*, 109; David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 132-133.

³² The following differences between the MT and LXX occur: Jer 31:34 = 38:34; 33:8 = 40:8; 36:3 = 43:3; 50:20 = 27:20.

³³ Jan de Waard, *A Handbook on Jeremiah* (Textual Criticism and the Translator 2; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns), 1-226; Redditt, *Prophets*, 117.

³⁴ The LXX version differs from the MT.

³⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 26-52: To build, to plant* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), v; Petersen, *Prophetic Literature*, 103-104; Sweeney, *Prophetic Literature*, 92.

³⁶ Holladay argues that Jer 31:34 may also be seen as poetry. Cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, 177). BHS and other Bible translations regard it as prose.

³⁷ Cf. Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-12, 15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13, 14-18.

³⁸ J. Gordon McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 79.

ment of exile. The poem in Jer 5:1-9³⁹ is an extraordinary piece of ancient Hebrew rhetoric, one of the finest in Jeremiah.⁴⁰ It is difficult to determine the origin and composition of Jer 5. Preuss⁴¹ believes that v. 1 is the only סלח reference in Jeremiah that does not belong to the Deuteronomistic redaction of the book.

In Jer 5:1-9 readers encounter a passage where both God and Jeremiah are spokespersons: God (vv. 1-2; 7-9) and Jeremiah (vv. 3-6). The central question in this passage is: Can this people be forgiven? The verb סלח is found in vv. 1 and 7 where God is the spokesperson: “Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look around and take note! Search its squares and see if you can find one person who acts justly and seeks truth —so that I may pardon (סלח) Jerusalem” (5:1), and “How can I pardon (סלח) you?⁴² Your children have forsaken me, and have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of prostitutes”⁴³ (5:7).

The tone in v. 1 is ironic. A rhetorical call goes out for a team of inspectors to conduct a thorough investigation in Jerusalem. God speaks as if the messengers will find a righteous person, but he scarcely believes it. He is prepared to take any evidence as enough. This passage is often compared with the passage about Sodom in Gen 18:23-32. In Sodom God was searching for at least ten righteous people. In Jer 5:1 God is willing to forgive Jerusalem if he can only find one person “who acts justly (משפט) and seeks truth (אמונה).” The lack of integrity and obedience is to be seen in the circumstance that even an oath sworn in God’s name bears no substance or honesty (v. 2).⁴⁴

Verses 7 and 8 focus on the sins of the people. These have alienated God beyond the point of forgiveness. The images in 7b and 8 are not easy to understand, because they are a combination of sexual and metaphorical terms. The

³⁹ Most scholars see 5:1-9 as a smaller literary unit. McKane makes a division between vv. 1-6 and 7-11. Cf. William McKane, *Jeremiah* (vol. 1; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 114-120.

⁴⁰ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 174-175; Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (AB 21a; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 372.

⁴¹ Horst D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 1; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 179.

⁴² The beginning of v. 7 is difficult to translate. Literally the Hebrew reads “where for this, will I pardon you.” McKane suggests that it can be translated either “How can I forgive you for this?” or “In view of this how can I forgive you?” Cf. McKane, *Jeremiah 1*, 117.

⁴³ The Masoretic text reads “they have cut themselves in the house of a prostitute” which have been translated into “they trooped to the houses of the prostitutes.” Different translation possibilities are proposed. Cf. De Waard, *Jeremiah*, 17.

⁴⁴ McKane, *Jeremiah 1*, 115; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 376; Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 72.

question still remains whether the community is being condemned for their religious or for their sexual practices.⁴⁵

Jeremiah 5:1-9 emphasises that God is seeking a way of forgiveness. He is ready and willing to forgive, but will not engage in cheap grace. He is also a God of justice and righteousness. Forgiveness still requires commitment from God's chosen people. The text implies that there is not a single sign of obedience which makes forgiveness impossible and nullifies God's positive intention. The people are accused of "serious" sins: rejecting truth and justice (5:1); forsaking God's law (5:4); worshipping false gods, committing adultery and turning to prostitutes (5:7).⁴⁶

2 Jeremiah 31:34 and 33:8

The so-called "Book of Consolation" (Jer 30:1-33:26)⁴⁷ has been described as the "pivotal center" and the "functional center" of Jeremiah. Chapters 30-31 and 32-33 can be seen as counterbalancing each other. Both sections include God's promise of a new covenant (31:31; 32:40)⁴⁸ and Lalleman-de Winkel⁴⁹ argues that hope is the central theme in these chapters. Two סלח references are found in the "Book of Consolation:" "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity (עון) and remember their sin (חטאת) no more" (Jer 31:34), and "I will cleanse (טהר) them from all the guilt (עון) of their sin (חטא) against me, and I will forgive all the guilt (עון) of their sin (חטא) and rebellion (פשע) against me" (Jer 33:8).

Different Hebrew terms are used to describe sin and divine forgiveness. Jeremiah 31:34 uses סלח (forgive) and לא זכר (not remember) together with עון (iniquity, guilt) and חטאת (sin). Jeremiah 33:8 uses תהר (cleanse) and סלח (forgive) together with three words for sin: עון (guilt, iniquity), חטא (to sin – verb) and פשע (rebellion). The use of the different terms reveals that divine forgiveness overpowers all the dimensions of sin.

In Jer 5:1 and 7 God yearned to forgive his people, but judgment followed. According to Jer 31:34 he is able to forgive his people as part of the new covenant. This passage speaks about a gracious act of amnesty declared by

⁴⁵ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 179.

⁴⁶ Ronald H. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 41-42; Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up, to Tear Down* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 60.

⁴⁷ Some scholars will restrict "The Book of Consolation" to Jer 31-32. Cf. Robin J. R. Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs: Judicial Differentiation in the Book of Jeremiah* (LHBOTS 481; New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 178.

⁴⁸ Plant, *Good Figs*, 178-179.

⁴⁹ Lalleman-de Winkel, *Jeremiah*, 148.

God, the forgiveness of the community.⁵⁰ This forgiveness statement appears at the end of the section, after the character of the new covenant is described. One can argue that the issue of forgiveness should come prior to the events described in vv. 31-34.⁵¹ However, these verses must not be seen in a linear way with one event following another. Divine forgiveness is an integral part of the relationship between God and his new covenant community, from the beginning till the end.

Jeremiah 33:7-9 reveals five promises that represent the reversal of negative traditions in the book and envisages Jerusalem as the key to the Israelites’ renewal. Verse 8 refers to the spiritual renewal reversing the sin and rebellion of 5:6 and 30:14-15.⁵² God’s forgiveness will have a direct influence on different people. God shows his forgiveness in a practical way by rebuilding the city and surrounding towns (cf. Jer 33:11-13). Divine forgiveness granted to Jerusalem will even be a witness to all the nations (Jer 33:9).

The notion of a new covenant is central in Jer 30-33. All the newness is possible because God has forgiven. Divine forgiveness help the people of God to break out of the system of reward and punishment. This new covenant is given by God without reason or explanation. The new covenant involves a new law that will be written on the people’s hearts (cf. 33:33).⁵³ It is interesting to note that in Jer 31:34 the forgiveness of Israel is seen both as the source as well as the evidence of the renewed covenant.⁵⁴

3 Jeremiah 36:3

Jeremiah 34-36 forms part of a literary unit focusing on false and true covenants and the dangers of rejecting the divine word.⁵⁵ Chapter 36 narrates an account of the way in which Baruch wrote and publicly read a scroll of Jeremiah. Theologically, the chapter develops the twin themes of God’s word and Judah’s response to it. The purpose of the scroll is to motivate Judah to hear (שמע) and to turn (שוב) from their evil ways. Historically, Jer 36 reveals that Judah’s opportunity to repent had passed. King Jehoiakim burned the scroll

⁵⁰ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* (vol. 2; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Allen, *Jeremiah*, 357.

⁵¹ Bungishabaku Katho, “The New Covenant and the Challenge of Building a New and Transformed Community in DR Congo: A Contextual Reading of Jeremiah 31:31-34,” *OTE* 18/1 (2005): 119-120.

⁵² Allen, *Jeremiah*, 375.

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 71-72.

⁵⁴ Jozef Krasovec, *Reward, Punishment and Forgiveness: The Thinking of and Beliefs of Ancient Israel in the Light of Greek and Modern Views* (VTSup 78; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 794.

⁵⁵ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36* (AB 21b; New York: Doubleday, 2004), 34; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 2008.

and Judah would also be destroyed.⁵⁶ Jeremiah 36:3 says, "It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn (שוב) from their evil ways, so that I may forgive (סלח) their iniquity (עון) and their sin (חטאת)."

Again readers find two different Hebrew terms for sin, עון (iniquity) and חטאת (sin) as well as a reference to "evil ways." A change in Judah's attitude could lead to God's change of mind and rescinding the judgment (cf. 26:3). The motif of repentance is portrayed by the phrase "turn (שוב) from their evil ways" (cf. 26:3; 36:7).⁵⁷ Once again the people's repentance is seen as pre-condition for divine forgiveness (cf. Isa 55:7, 59:20; Ezek 33:10-16).

This text opens the possibility for God to forgive, but does not make a definite promise like in Jer 31:34 and 33:8. The Hebrew particle אולי (may be/perhaps) is used to describe God's wish and a new possibility. God hoped that when the people were reminded of every disaster he was going to inflict on them, they would abandon their evil ways and be forgiven. One can debate whether God is really more hopeful to find obedience now than when he summoned Jeremiah and others to find a righteous soul in Jerusalem (5:1). Jeremiah 36:3 portrays that the divine offer is genuine: Judah can return and be forgiven.⁵⁸

Jeremiah 36:3 challenges the Zion theology that YHWH will never abandon Zion regardless of what his people have done. The negative consequence of sin cannot be ignored; forgiveness does not necessarily exclude punishment or exempt one from the obligation to obey God.⁵⁹

4 Jeremiah 50:20

Jeremiah 46-51 portrays God's judgment on other nations with chapters 50-51 focusing on Babylon. God promises to punish Babylon and restore Israel to her land. Jeremiah 50:17-20 forms a small literary unit that depicts Israel's return and restoration.⁶⁰ Jeremiah may be labeled as a messenger of hope in a crisis. Hope is impossible without the prospect of a better life and future.⁶¹ Therefore, Jer 50:20 refers to this new future during the days of restoration: "In those days and at that time, says the Lord, the iniquity (עון) of Israel shall be sought, and

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 130; F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (NAC 16; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 318.

⁵⁷ John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 622.

⁵⁸ Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 319; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, 589.

⁵⁹ Olivier, *NIDOTTE 3*, 262.

⁶⁰ Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 130; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 514.

⁶¹ Louis J. Stulman, "Jeremiah as a Messenger of Hope in a Crisis," *Int* 62/1 (2008): 16.

there shall be none; and the sins (חַטָּאת) of Judah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon (סָלַח) the remnant that I have spared.”

The expression “in those days and at that time” occurs three times in the OT, all of them in Jeremiah (Jer 33:15; 50:4, 20). It refers to the future and is considered by some to be a messianic utterance.⁶² In Jer 5:20 the particle כִּי (for) appears with the verb סָלַח (forgive, pardon). The circumstance that God has forgiven the remnant is given as a reason why a search for sin in Israel and Judah will produce nothing.⁶³ One also finds a wordplay in the last two Hebrew words of the sentence: לְאִשֶּׁר אֲשָׁאִיר (“the remnant that I have spared”).⁶⁴

Jeremiah 50:17-20 can be compared with vv. 4-7, because both units begin with the expression “in those days and at that time” and may be labeled as a prophecy of salvation. In contrast to vv. 4-7 this section offers two first-person singular verbs describing God’s action: “I will restore” (v. 19) and “I will pardon” (v. 20). Five terms used in Jer 50:4-7 are used in a new way in vv. 17-20. Predominantly negative terms are transformed producing a hopeful pattern of renewal.⁶⁵

Envisaged in v. 20 is a happy reversal of the judgments in Jer 2:22 and 30:14-15. God’s forgiveness makes the difference (cf. also 31:34). Divine forgiveness permits Israel’s life and history to begin again as did His promise of a new covenant in Jer 30-33.⁶⁶

E OTHER FORGIVENESS PASSAGES IN THE MAJOR PROPHETS⁶⁷

There are several other passages in the major prophets referring directly or indirectly to divine forgiveness. These passages use the following Hebrew verbs or phrases: כָּפַר (Isa 6:7; 27:9; Ezek 16:63;); נָשָׂא (Isa 33:24; 53:12); חָנַן (Isa 30:18); רָפָא (Isa 53:5; 57:18; Jer 3:22)⁶⁸; רָחַם (Isa 54:8; 55:7; 60:10; Jer 42:12; Ezek 39:25); סוּר עוֹן (Isa 6:7); רָצוּחַ (Isa 40:2); לֹא זָשָׁר (Isa 43:25; 64:9; Jer 31:34; Ezek 33:16); מָחָה (Isa 43:25; 44:22); סָבַל (Isa 53:11); נָחַם (Jer 18:8; 26:19); טָהַר (Jer 33:8; Ezek 36:25-26, 33; 37:23).

⁶² Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 412.

⁶³ William McKane, *Jeremiah* (vol. 2; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 1271.

⁶⁴ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52* (AB 21c; New York: Doubleday, 2004), 397.

⁶⁵ Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 409; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 514.

⁶⁶ Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 418; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 264; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52*, 397.

⁶⁷ It is difficult to determine the forgiveness passages in the major prophets. See Daniel F. O’Kennedy, “Die Gebed om Vergifnis in die Ou Testament” (D.Th. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 1994), 267 for a possible list of references.

⁶⁸ For a detailed discussion of the use of רָפָא in the prophetic books see Daniel F. O’Kennedy, “The Metaphor of Yahweh as Healer in the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament,” *IDS* 41/3 (2007): 443-455.

The above mentioned references convey different perspectives concerning the nature of divine forgiveness. The majority of passages do not refer to repentance (שוב) as a pre-condition for forgiveness. Merely four passages depict the “turning away from wicked ways” as pre-condition (Jer 3:22; 18:8; 26:19; Ezek 33:14-16). On the other hand, Isa 44:22 summons Judah to return to God, because he has already forgiven them. Three passages refer to forgiveness in the context of the servant of the Lord who will bear the sin of the people (Isa 53:5, 11, 12). Two passages refer to the future day of the Lord (Isa 27:9; Ezek 36:33). Divine forgiveness does not merely focus on the spiritual restoration of a relationship but also the physical restoration and rebuilding of a community (Ezek 36:33).

Several verses portray the reasons why God forgives: For God’s own sake (Isa 43:25); because of his holy name (Ezek 36:22-25; 39:25); because of Judah’s sinful ways (Isa 57:18); because they are a chosen people (Isa 64:9); because he is a gracious God (Isa 30:18); because God has remorse and changed his mind (Jer 18:8; 26:19); because God will establish a covenant with his people (Ezek 16:63); so that they can become God’s people (Ezek 37:23).

Lastly readers find at least three passages depicting God’s unwillingness to forgive (Isa 22:14; 27:11b; Jer 18:23): In two instances (Isa 22:14; Jer 18:23) the Hebrew stem כפר (reconcile, cover, forgive) are used and once the stem (רחם) (Isa 27:11b). It is significant that the term סלח does not appear in any passage in the major prophets referring to God’s unwillingness to forgive.

F CONCLUSION

The above discussion has led the author to arrive at the following conclusions:

- (i) Different terms and phrases are used to portray forgiveness in the OT, but scholars agree that divine forgiveness is expressed primarily by the term סלח. The term סלח occurs seven times in the major prophets, once in Isaiah (Isa 55:7) and six times in Jeremiah (Jer 5:1, 7; 31:34; 33:8; 36:3; and 50:20). The סלח passages are found in different literary styles and genres, both poetic and prosaic.
- (ii) Most scholars argue that the book of Jeremiah was influenced by the book of Deuteronomy and linked to the prophetic traditions of Hosea. A comparison between the סלח passages in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah does not provide extra support for this hypothesis. There is only one סלח reference in Deuteronomy, but it focuses on God’s unwillingness to forgive (Deut 29:19 [20]). Although forgiveness is a central theme in Hos 11 and 14, one finds no סלח reference in the book of Hosea.
- (iii) There is a concentration of סלח references in two OT contexts: (1) the prayer literature (cf. Exod 34:9; Num 14:19; 1 Kgs 8:22-53 = 2 Chr

6:12-42; Neh 9:17; etc.); and (2) the Priestly literature of the Pentateuch (Lev 4-5; 19:22; Num 15:25, 26 and 28). The סלח references in the major prophets do not follow the same pattern. All the references in Isaiah and Jeremiah are found outside the prayer literature. One finds no reference in Ezekiel despite its relationship to the Priestly tradition.

- (iv) Merely three סלח passages portray repentance as a pre-condition for forgiveness (Isa 55:7; Jer 5:1; 36:3). A summary of the other forgiveness passages in the major prophets also emphasize the same fact. The major prophetic books do not reveal that God forgives because of the repentance of his people; he forgives because he is a gracious and loving God.
- (v) The major prophets convey the following concerning the nature of forgiveness: (1) The possibility of forgiveness is questioned or denied because of the worship of foreign gods (Jer 5:7); (2) Forgiveness is an essential feature of the new covenant and the days of restoration (Jer 31:34; 33:8; 50:20); (3) Forgiveness is a matter in which God takes the initiative. He wants to break the vicious cycle of sin and punishment; (4) Forgiveness is dependent upon the grace of God.

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