

# Divine Forgiveness in the Book of Jeremiah

H. G. L. (ERIC) PEELS

## Abstract

The theme of forgiveness occurs more often in the book of Jeremiah than in any other prophetic book. This emphasis is remarkable given the book's overall message of impending doom. An exegetical and contextual analysis shows the development of this theme. The first stage presents the ultimate possibility of forgiveness on condition of Israel's repentance. In the second stage, the possibility of forgiveness disappears, since Israel refuses to repent; prophetic intercession is forbidden now, and judgment cannot be averted anymore. But in the third stage, in a wonderful and surprising turnaround, God promises forgiveness once again, not because of Israel's repentance, but because of his grace and love. Finally, forgiveness is an essential feature of the new covenant and the days of restoration.

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## Introduction

**B**oth in personal and in social life, forgiveness is of fundamental importance. According to the Jewish philosopher Hanna Arendt, “the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the

faculty of forgiving.”<sup>1</sup> The Reformed ethicist Lewis Smedes formulates it thus: “Our history is an inevitable component of our being. One thing only can release us from the grip of our history. That one thing is forgiveness.”<sup>2</sup> James Loader provides a useful working definition of forgiveness: “the interpersonal pardoning of guilt extended or offered by an offended party and accepted or dismissed by a guilty partner, by which the former party relinquishes any right or requital from the latter.”<sup>3</sup> Amidst all inextricable questions of evil and guilt, hatred and broken relationships, forgiveness paves the way to restoration, purification, and renewal. Forgiveness opens closed doors and enables a new future to come, realizing desires of reconciliation.

Particularly in religions forgiveness plays a significant role as a foundational construct in the relationship between gods and men. Pivotal to the Christian faith is the conviction that God’s forgiveness of human sin is by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, who on the cross of Golgotha prayed for his enemies. Forgiveness is an essential element of faith, prayer, and the commandments. “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” is a statement in the Apostles’ Creed. Likewise, the Lord’s Prayer contains the request “and forgive us our debts.” Forgiveness is also part and parcel of Christian ethics: “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3:13 NRSV).

Understandably, handbooks on forgiveness and reconciliation especially pay attention to the message of the New Testament and its many texts about forgiveness. Nonetheless, it is also worth consulting the Old Testament to hear what it has to say on this theme. This part of the Bible tells a story spanning many centuries, which time and time again bears witness to evil and guilt, divisions among men, and between God and man. How does forgiveness fit into this? The conviction that YHWH is a God of forgiveness is anchored deep in the Old Testament, in the credo of Exodus 34:7 “forgiving [*ns*’, נָשָׂא] iniquity and transgression and sin.”<sup>4</sup> This credo reverberates throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Ps 86:5; Neh 9:17; Dan 9:9). It is a particular aspect of the portrayal of YHWH in the Old Testament that he

<sup>1</sup> Hanna Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 237. In this study, she remarkably refers to Jesus of Nazareth as “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs” (239).

<sup>2</sup> “The World’s Largest Quotation Site,” [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/lewis\\_b\\_smedes\\_668978](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/lewis_b_smedes_668978). Smedes is author of the bestseller *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> James A. Loader, “Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1:296.

<sup>4</sup> The immediate response to this confession is Moses’s prayer for forgiveness (*slkh*, סָלַח) in verse 9. The same combination of revelation from God and corresponding prayer for forgiveness is present in Numbers 14:18–19.

is a God who yearns to forgive (cf. Isa 30:18). At the same time, this forgiveness is never a matter of *billige Gnade* (cheap grace), but it takes place in the field of tension between God's love and his holiness.<sup>5</sup>

Of all Old Testament books, Jeremiah especially exposes the polarity between guilt and forgiveness. Unparalleled in the Old Testament, the book of Jeremiah is "a remarkable interpretive struggle concerning the continuity of Israel's life with YHWH that is rooted in YHWH's commitment and concerns the discontinuity in Israel's life with YHWH that is caused by severe judgment."<sup>6</sup> However, we would not expect forgiveness to be a prominent notion in this book: Jeremiah is known as "the weeping prophet," notorious for his radical doom oracles,<sup>7</sup> and his book refers to the last days of the kingdom of Judah (late 7th–early 6th century BC), over which the shadow of total collapse falls. This era is characterized by unforgiveness: "Surely this came upon Judah at the command of LORD [YHWH], to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed ... and the LORD [YHWH] was not willing to pardon" (2 Kgs 24:3–4, emphasis added). Judgment is certain. The warning from the beginning of Israel's history in the land becomes a reality at the end of its history: "You cannot serve the LORD [YHWH]; for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; *he will not forgive* your transgressions or your sins" (Josh 24:19, emphasis added). Remarkably, however, derivatives of the root word for "to forgive" (*slkh*, סלח) occur more often in Jeremiah than in all other prophetic books. In this article, I will trace the theme of forgiveness within the book of Jeremiah and provide a theological analysis of it.

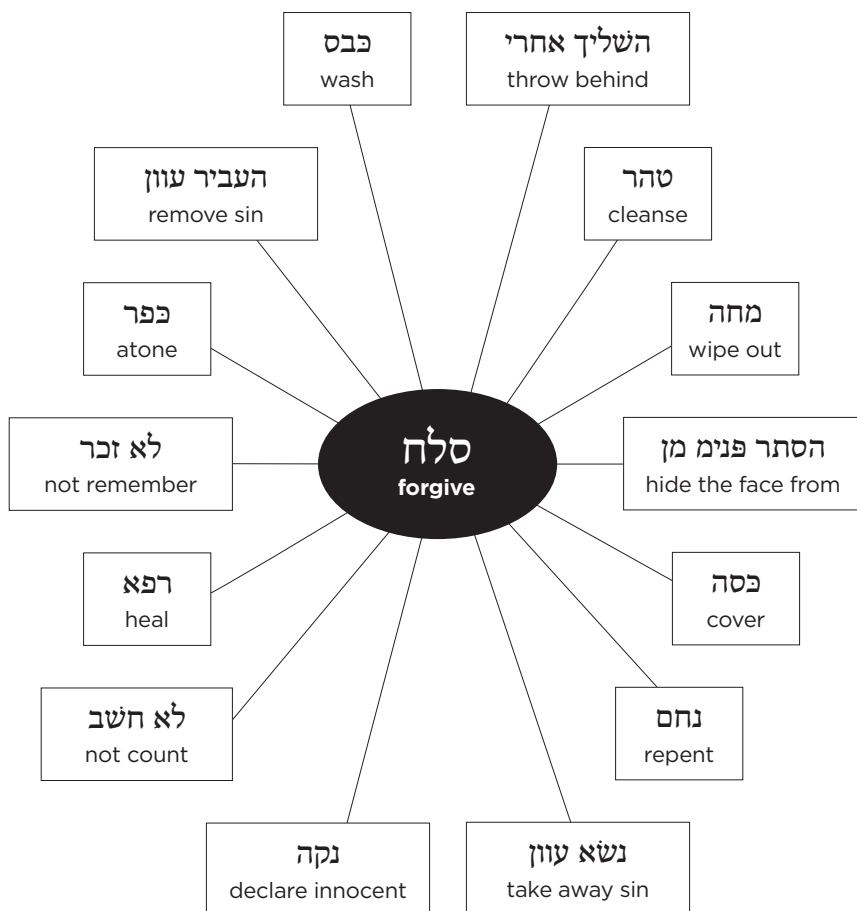
<sup>5</sup> This awareness is lacking in the famous quote from Heinrich Heine (German writer/poet in the 19th century), who, when his wife prayed to God to forgive him as he was lying on his deathbed, interrupted her and said: "N'en doute pas, ma chère, Il me pardonnera, car c'est son métier" (Do not doubt, my dear, he will forgive me, because it is his job); see [https://fr.wikiquote.org/wiki/Heinrich\\_Heine](https://fr.wikiquote.org/wiki/Heinrich_Heine).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41. Cf. Jože Krašovec, *Reward, Punishment, and Forgiveness: The Thinking and Beliefs of Ancient Israel in the Light of Greek and Modern Views* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 449: "Jeremiah occupies a unique position among the biblical books that deal with the polarity between guilt, punishment and forgiveness. Nowhere else are there so many words expressing the whole semantic range of this polarity as are found in all the major parts of this book."

<sup>7</sup> Note already in the Talmudic tract Baba Batra (14a), we find the following argument in reference to the order of the major prophets in the Tanak: after the book of Kings, which ends with a record of destruction, Jeremiah comes first "because he speaks throughout of destruction"; then Ezekiel, who starts with destruction and ends with consolation; finally, Isaiah who is full of consolation.

## I. The Word Group “Forgive”

The Hebrew root *slkh* (סלח) is commonly defined as the technical term for “to forgive.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, in the semantic field of “forgiveness,” there are many related terms, as the following diagram shows.



<sup>8</sup> Cf. Johann Jakob Stamm, *Erlösen und Vergeben im Alten Testament: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Bern: Francke, 1940), 47; Daniël F. O’Kennedy, “Divine Forgiveness in the Major Prophets,” *Old Testament Essays* 24.3 (2011): 731; Christa Göbel, “Denn bei dir ist die Vergebung ...’—*slh* im Alten Testament,” *Theologische Versuche* 8 (1977): 27. In my article I follow the Masoretic text. In the Septuagint, the relevant passages are at different locations, but the content of the forgiveness references is the same. The Greek translator consistently rendered the root *slkh* as *hileōs esomai/genomai* (ἵλεως ἔσομαι/γένομαι), “I will be/become gracious” and once (33:8) as *ou mē mnēsthēsomai* (οὐ μὴ μνησθήσομαι), “I will not remember.”

Within the Old Testament, the root *slkh* occurs fifty times. There are forty-six occurrences of the verb, three of the noun *selikhah* (סְלִיחָה), and one of the adjective *sallakh* (סָלַח). Significantly, the subject of *slkh* is always God;<sup>9</sup> the root is never used to describe forgiveness between men. *Slkh* is, therefore, pre-eminently a theological term.

The root is used in three different contexts, namely, cult (sacrifice), liturgy (psalms, prayers), and prophecy. In prophetic literature, however, *slkh* is relatively rare; it occurs once in Isaiah (55:3), once in Amos (7:2), and six times in Jeremiah (5:1, 7; 31:34; 33:8; 36:3; 50:20).

All occurrences of the root in Jeremiah are of this verb. In addition to *slkh*, the book uses only a few of the other words of the above diagram. The expression *l'zchr* (לֹא זָכַר) “not remember” occurs in 31:34 and the root *thr* (טָהַר) “cleanse” in 33:8, both in direct relation to *slkh*. Furthermore, *rph* (רָפָא) “heal” occurs in 3:22. Three additional roots are used in relation to unforgiveness: *mkhh* (מָחָה) “wipe out” and *kphr* (כָּפַר) “atone” in 18:23, and *nqh* (נָקָה) “declare innocent” in 30:11 (= 46:28). A related theme is that of God’s repentance (with *nkhm*, נָחַם).<sup>10</sup>

In the passages relevant to this study, three lines of thought are found: first, God’s desire to forgive, with the question whether forgiveness is still possible (the door is still slightly open); second, God’s refusal to forgive, with a ban on intercession (the door is closed); third, God’s promise to forgive anyway, with a foreshadowing of a radical remission of guilt (the door is opened again). Afterward, we look at how to understand the development that becomes discernable in these three lines of thought. The study rounds out with our conclusions.

## II. *Is Forgiveness Still Possible?*

The book of Jeremiah had a long and complex genesis, to which the divergence between the Hebrew (MT) and Greek (Lxx) texts already bears witness. There is an ongoing discussion about its composition, structure, and theological intentions. Many exegetes, however, hold the opinion that Jeremiah 2–6 belong to the oldest sections of the book.<sup>11</sup> These chapters

<sup>9</sup> *Slkh* is one of the two roots in Hebrew which relate exclusively to God and God’s actions; the other one is *br* (בָּרָא, to create); cf. Andreas Schüle, “At the Border of Sin and Forgiveness: *Salah* in the Old Testament,” in Andreas Schüle, *Theology from the Beginning: Essays on the Primeval History and Its Canonical Context*, FAT 113 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 183.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah 4:28; 15:6; 18:8, 10; 20:16; 26:3, 13, 19; 31:19; 42:10.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. Gordon McConville, “Jeremiah: Theology of,” in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997),

contain oracles of judgment, announcing “the foe from the north.” In this earliest period of Jeremiah’s preaching, conversion to YHWH is loudly proclaimed, and traces of hope are found. Can the coming judgment still be averted?

The theme of Jeremiah 2–4 is God’s accusation against his unfaithful people: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride .... What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me ...?” (2:2, 4). Thus sounds the almost emotional complaint of the betrayed and disappointed spouse about his wife who has committed adultery (3:1–2). This preaching possibly refers to the situation in the aftermath of the reformation of King Josiah (622 BC), about which Jeremiah is otherwise remarkably silent (cf. 3:6). Apparently, the conversion of Judah had been so superficial that it was a return “only in pretense” (3:4–5, 10). God even gave adulterous Israel a certificate of divorce (3:8). But there is still hope. The prophet is ordered to proclaim to the people, “Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry forever” (3:12).<sup>12</sup> “Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness” (3:22). God longs to grant forgiveness—but then it needs to go deeper, with acknowledgment of sin and confession of guilt: “Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against the LORD your God” (3:13). The call in Jeremiah 4:1–4 to circumcise the heart for God follows this same course.

The question is whether this hope is realistic: has evil not put its roots down too deep? Jeremiah 4 continues by announcing judgment: catastrophe is coming from the north (v. 6)! This is then followed by an explanation of the reasons for God’s judgment (Jer 5:1–9), which takes the form of a dialogue between God and Jeremiah, reminiscent of Abraham’s prayer for Sodom (Gen 18:23–33).<sup>13</sup> In this context, the prophet is given a curious task: “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 Jerusalem*” (Jer 5:1, emphasis added). For the first time, *slkh* is used. Is the door still open? In verse 1, a call goes

4:758; Jack R. Lundbom, “Jeremiah,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 3:686–87.

<sup>12</sup> In the law of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 it is determined that once a man has given his wife a bill of divorce, he shall not take her back. That YHWH, in Jeremiah 3:12, like a betrayed spouse and regardless of having given Israel a certificate of divorce, calls for a return and is prepared to bind his people to himself—contrary to the law of Deuteronomy 24—stresses his desire to forgive.

<sup>13</sup> Although Sodom’s ruin was inevitable (the two angels were on their way to that city), YHWH still stood for Abraham (Gen 18:22). The reason is what seems like an almost desperate will to forgive, involving Abraham and provoking him to plead for forgiveness of Sodom. The Masoretic Text has a *tiqqun soferim* (scribal correction) here: “Abraham still stood for YHWH.”

out for a team of inspectors (including the prophet; see his report in vv. 3–4) to conduct a thorough investigation in Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup> The task is to judge the severity of the situation. Even though there is a reason for the judgment, possibly there is a way out: if there is just one righteous person in Jerusalem, YHWH will pardon the city (v. 1)! One is the absolute minimum (cf. the ten righteous ones as the minimum in Abraham’s plea in Gen 18)—if at all possible, God wants to forgive. The prophet must acknowledge, however, that there is not a single righteous person, neither among the ordinary people, who do not know YHWH’s law (v. 3), nor among the elite citizens who are supposed to know it (v. 4). The conclusion of the quest and the prophet’s comment must be that judgment is fully deserved (v. 6).

This prophetic preaching, which calls for repentance even though judgment is unavoidable, resonates in Jeremiah until at least the fourth year of Jehoiakim (Jer 36:1). This year (605 BC) brought a great turnaround in the history of the ancient Near East, because the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar decisively defeated Egypt in the Battle of Carchemish. His armies swarmed over the territory that had previously belonged to the Assyrian empire, including Judah, resulting in Nebuchadnezzar’s dominion in Syria–Palestine. Thus, “the foe from the north” was now actually coming; the ultimate downfall of Judah was drawing near. However, there was still a spark of hope. According to Jeremiah 36:1, it was exactly in this year that the prophet received the order to write down on a scroll all the words YHWH had spoken to him since King Josiah’s times (cf. Jer 1:2). It concerns the last-ditch attempt of YHWH to turn the ship around:<sup>15</sup> “It may be that the house of Judah hears all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil way; *so that I may forgive* their iniquity and their sin” (Jer 36:3, emphasis added). It is strong evidence of God’s willingness to forgive—he is willing to forgive but will not engage in cheap grace. At the behest of the prophet, Baruch writes everything on a scroll and reads these words aloud in public in the temple. The purpose of this is expressed in Jeremiah 36:7: “It may be that their plea will come before the LORD, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways, for great is the anger and wrath that the LORD has pronounced against this people.” These words echo the temple preaching of Jeremiah 26:

<sup>14</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 72. For similar “search parties,” see Amos 3:9–11, Zephaniah 1:12, Ezekiel 9—and much later the search of the cynic Diogenes, who lit a lamp in broad daylight and walked the streets of Athens “looking for a man.” Cf. Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 376.

<sup>15</sup> Georg Fischer, *Jeremia: Prophet über Völker und Königreiche* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 246.

Thus says the LORD [YHWH]: Stand in the court of the LORD's [YHWH's] house, and speak to all the cities of Judah which come to worship in the house of the LORD [YHWH]; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. It may be they will listen, all of them, and I will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings. (vv. 2–3)

Still, the call to repentance rings out, so that YHWH may grant forgiveness and avert judgment. The announced judgment is conditional and no *fatum*. Still, God wants to forgive. The word *'ulay* (אוּלַי), “perhaps, it may be” (elsewhere in the prophetic preaching also *mi yodea'* [מִי יוֹדֵעַ] “who knows”), does not assume that God is uncertain—as if he is unsure and sitting idly by—but stresses God's desire to forgive.<sup>16</sup>

### III. No More Forgiveness

Hope for forgiveness, however, turns out to be futile. God's desire to forgive has always been paired with the call to Israel to repent, to confess guilt, and to turn away from evil (Jer 3:12; 4:1, 4, 14). This is a *conditio sine qua non*. However, God's people refuse to listen; evil is rooted too deeply; they have a stubborn and rebellious heart (*lev sorer umoreh*, לֵב סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵה, Jer 5:23). Israel's unrighteousness and sin form a permanent barrier to God's forgiveness (Jer 5:25). From his side, YHWH does everything to call his people back. Because of his desire to forgive he sends out the prophet Jeremiah on three occasions: first as an investigator (Jer 5:1); secondly, as a grape-gatherer who passes his hands over the branches (Jer 6:9); and, finally, as a metal assayer (tester, Jer 6:27). If there is but one righteous person (5:1), one good grape (6:9), or one piece of silver in the lead ore (6:29), then judgment will be averted. However, it proves to be hopeless; the prophet must acknowledge that evil is too entrenched. Time and time again it becomes clear that no transformation can be expected from Israel's side: “Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots?” (Jer 13:23). Israel breaks the covenant with their God—and thus God cannot but reject them.

After the negative result of Jeremiah's quest through Jerusalem's streets and plazas, the impossibility of Israel receiving forgiveness is expressed in the question YHWH asks: “How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me” (Jer 5:7). As in verse 1, verse 7 uses the verb *slkh*, but the “maybe” of verse 1 (first person singular) is changed into an impossibility. Here YHWH

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Die Reue Gottes: Aspekte alttestamentlicher Gottesvorstellung*, Biblische Studien 65 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), 78; Eric Peels, *Shadow Sides: God in the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 67–68.



asks “mother” Jerusalem on which grounds he could forgive her—because her children only go astray and commit adultery. Judgment is coming—not because God does not *want* to forgive, but because God *cannot* forgive and Israel perseveres in evil.

Within the section Jeremiah 5–9, which deals with the theme of covenant breaking, the unavoidability of the coming judgment is also asserted in the form of a refrain, which occurs three times (5:9, 29; 9:8): “Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD; and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?”<sup>17</sup> There is no more room for forgiveness. Like 5:7, this refrain is formulated as a question, which indicates that judgment is not something that God enacts to his heart’s content. After all, this concerns his own heritage, “the beloved of my heart [soul]” (*yediduth naphshi*, יְדִידוּת נַפְשִׁי, 12:7).

There is yet another way in which YHWH makes clear that a limit has been reached and that the coming judgment has become inescapable. He forbids his prophet twice to pray for the people: “As for you, do not pray for this people, or raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you” (Jer 7:16).<sup>18</sup> “Then the LORD said to me: Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!” (Jer 15:1).

The immediate context in Jeremiah 14 shows how radical this ban is. Emotional prayers of confession, intercession, and devotion are heard here (vv. 7–9, 20–22), and even a plea to the God of the covenant not to break his covenant (v. 22). But God has closed the door and refuses to listen to the people any longer.

Intercession is a feature of prophets in the line of Moses and perhaps belonged to the prophetic task.<sup>19</sup> The Old Testament mentions several instances in which God forgives the sins of his people in response to the intervention of a prophet who acts as an intercessor.<sup>20</sup> The prophet Jeremiah was also

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Eric Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament*, Oudtestamentische Studiën 31 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 124–27.

<sup>18</sup> Similar formulations are found in Jeremiah 11:14, “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble,” and 14:11, “The LORD said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people.”

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hetty Lalleman-de Winkel, *Jeremiah in Prophetic Tradition: An Examination of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, Biblical Exegesis and Theology 26 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 209–24.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Moses in Exodus 32:11–13, 31–32; 34:9 (the first time in the Old Testament that God’s forgiveness occurs) and in Numbers 11:2, 21:7; Samuel in 1 Samuel 7:5–9; 12:19; Amos in Amos 7:2; Daniel in Daniel 9:9, 19. Cf. Abraham in Genesis 18:23–33; Solomon in 1 Kings 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 50; Psalm 99:6; and Nehemiah 9:17.

known to perform this task (cf. Jer 18:20; 21:2; 37:3; 42:2). The intercessors/prophets are channels for forgiveness. According to Jeremiah 7:16 and 15:1, however, this pathway is now being cut off, and heaven is closed. No more intercession for the people means no more forgiveness for the people—not because God is not prepared to forgive, but because the people are not prepared to convert. Israel does not listen, so God shall not listen to them anymore.

The dire message that there is no more room for forgiveness is strongly highlighted in one of the so-called *confessiones* of Jeremiah: “Yet you, O LORD, know all their plotting to kill me. *Do not forgive their iniquity, do not blot out their sin from your sight.* Let them be tripped up before you; deal with them while you are angry” (18:23, emphasis added). This verse is the conclusion to an appeal by the prophet for divine intervention, in the penultimate *confessio* (18:18–23). These *confessiones* (scattered throughout Jer 10–20) should be interpreted not just as a biographical product of the agonizing soul struggles of the prophet himself, but also as reflections of the struggles of God with his people.<sup>21</sup> The prophet is rejected and attacked, which mirrors the people’s rejection of the word of YHWH. In his imprecatory prayer, Jeremiah links up with God’s announcement of judgment. In Jeremiah’s appeal in Jeremiah 18:23 it becomes clear that a point of no return has been passed.<sup>22</sup> The line that God has drawn: no intercession, no more forgiveness: evil has gone too far.

#### IV. *But Yet, Forgiveness*

Jeremiah’s preaching of judgment may be dark and threatening, but his message does not lack hopeful promises for the future. This positive dimension of his message is already indicated in Jeremiah 1, which denotes the prophet’s ministry with not only the verbs “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy, and to overthrow,” but also the verbs “to build and to plant” (v. 10). The promises for the future are especially found in the so-called Book of Comfort in the middle of Jeremiah (Jer 30–31 MT). This literary

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Eric Peels, “Jeremiah, Prophet of Ultimate Ruin and New Hope,” in Eric Peels and S. D. Snyman, eds., *The Lion Has Roared: Theological Themes in the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 111–14.

<sup>22</sup> Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25*, WBC 26 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 254, expound their translation (“Do not *continue* to cover ... do not *continue* to wipe away”) [emphasis added] thus: “The translation of these verses suggests that Jeremiah again acknowledges the correctness and necessity of judgment. He recognizes that intercession for his people no longer has a place, he puts them in Yahweh’s hands. The translation ‘do not continue to’ emphasizes the shift from intercession to an acceptance of judgment.”

block picks up and amplifies the intimations of hope in previous chapters,<sup>23</sup> elaborating God's "thoughts of peace" concerning his people (29:11) and the "good" he will do to them (29:32). The main theme of the Book of Comfort is what YHWH will bring about after the seventy years of exile (29:10), the wonderful reversal announced in Jeremiah 30:3: "For the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD."

The climax of the Book of Comfort is a series of five short oracles about Israel's new future,<sup>24</sup> with the well-known prophecy about the new covenant in the middle (31:31–34). This oracle emphasizes the discontinuity between God's past and future relationships with Israel, as it states that YHWH's new covenant with his people will not be like the one he made with their fathers (v. 32).<sup>25</sup> It will be different in three respects: it will be internalized, extensive, and unconditional.

In the first place, the new covenant will be written on the human heart (v. 33). From now on, the Torah will be decisive across social, political, and religious life. The old covenant called upon the people to circumcise their heart (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4), but the new covenant implies a divine heart "surgery," which internalizes the covenant (Deut 30:6). The second distinctive feature of the new covenant is that knowledge of God will extend to everyone, all ages and classes, so that it will no longer be necessary that one person teach another to know God (v. 34a). The third distinctive feature—and the most important one—is that the new covenant will be unconditional. There is mention neither of the people's repentance nor of a call for return to God.

This unconditional character of the new covenant is revealed most clearly at the end of the oracle, which speaks about forgiveness. Unlike the text discussed above (in section II), forgiveness is promised here without any condition: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more" (31:34b). The message of this text is about total forgiveness. The words "iniquity" and "sin" are deliberately in the singular. They refer not so much to all sorts of moral and religious sins as to the all-encompassing sin

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<sup>23</sup> Leslie C. Allen, "Jeremiah: Book of," in Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 433. The theological message of Jeremiah 32 is elaborated on in chapter 33; both chapters are closely connected to (and sometimes interpreted as a part of) the Book of Comfort.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah 32:23–26, 27–30, 31–34, 35–37, 38–40.

<sup>25</sup> Despite several points of resemblance with the previous section (31:27–30), this prophecy should be taken as a separate textual unit. Cf. Jeremiah Unterman, *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah's Thought in Transition*, JSOTS 54 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987), 94–95.

of the breaking of the covenant. It is this sin that God will forgive; his forgiveness brings Israel the reestablishment of the “marriage” after the “divorce.” What YHWH yearned to do before (cf. Jer 4–6), he will now be able to do.

As Jože Krašovec observes, “the declaration on forgiveness [Jer 31:24] is the pinnacle of the passage, explaining everything that is said about the new covenant.”<sup>26</sup> In this text, the forgiveness of Israel is seen as both the source and the evidence of the renewed covenant. The particle *ki* (כִּי) is most often interpreted in a causal sense: the new covenant is possible *because* God will forgive iniquity.<sup>27</sup> The foundation of the new covenant is divine forgiveness without the precondition of human repentance, as was formerly the case (cf. Deut 30:2; Jer 4:1; 36:3; etc.). However, it is also possible to understand *ki* not as a conjunction but rather as an interjection “yes, verily.” This is the interpretation of Andreas Schüle, who comments that “in the establishment of the new covenant ... two things happen. God writes the Torah on the heart of Israel and forgives the guilt such that God no longer remembers the sins of Israel.”<sup>28</sup> Setting no preconditions, the Book of Comfort continues a notion already present in Jeremiah 24:6–7 and 29:10–14,<sup>29</sup> but 31:34 also presents the opposite of the impossibility of forgiveness in 5:1, 7. Forgiveness is not impossible here but guaranteed. The motive behind this divine forgiveness is not to be found in any human action but in the heart of YHWH, who “is incapable of not having a relationship with Israel” (cf. 31:20).<sup>30</sup> God breaks the vicious cycle of sin, guilt, and punishment, and takes away the

<sup>26</sup> Krašovec, *Reward, Punishment, and Forgiveness*, 794; Cf. Jože Krašovec, “Vergebung und neuer Bund nach Jer 31,31–34,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 105 (1993): 437; O’Kennedy, “Divine Forgiveness,” 739; Gobel, “Denn bei dir,” 23. The promise of divine forgiveness gives the new covenant “eine bleibend tragende, nicht mehr zerstörbare Grundlage [a lasting supportive basis, no longer a fragile one]” (Georg Fischer, *Jeremia: Der Stand der theologischen Diskussion* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007], 157).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Sigmund Böhmer, *Heimkehr und neuer Bund: Studien zu Jeremia 30–31* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 77: “Jahwes Sündenvergebung eröffnet den Weg in die Zukunft [JHWH’s forgiveness of sins opens the way for the future]”; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 357: “Here is the precondition of the new covenant.” Besides the widely held opinion that the causal *ki* clause is the presupposition or ground of the installation of the new covenant—thus the reason for all that has gone before—there is also the interpretation that verses 31–34 are presented as a realization or actualization of forgiveness of sins. Cf. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 2:822.

<sup>28</sup> Schüle, “At the Border,” 197.

<sup>29</sup> On these passages (and the interpretation of the causal *ki* clause in Jer 24:7), see Hermann-Josef Stipp, “Jeremia 24: Geschichtsbild und historischer Ort,” in Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Studien zum Jeremiabuch: Text und Redaktion*, FAT 96 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 358–63.

<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann, *Book of Jeremiah*, 157; cf. Georg Fischer, *Das Trostbüchlein: Text, Komposition und Theologie von Jer 30–31*, SBB 26 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1993), 276–77.

iniquity. He turns the “full stop” of judgment into the “comma” of grace.<sup>31</sup>

Closely connected to the Book of Comfort, and elaborating upon its themes, are the subsequent chapters, Jeremiah 32–33. Jeremiah’s symbolic act of purchasing a field in Anathoth (ch. 32) conveys a strong message, especially because the story is situated during the siege of Jerusalem, when the Babylonian army was already devastating the land of Judah. Against this background, the promise of a new covenant is repeated. It will be “an everlasting covenant” (*berith ‘olam*, בְּרִית עוֹלָם); God will put the fear of YHWH in the peoples’ hearts, ending with God’s rejoicing in doing good to them (32:40–41). In Jeremiah 33, the message of God’s one-sided forgiveness receives particular emphasis: “I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me” (v. 8). In this verse, the three most familiar Hebrew terms for sin occur to enhance the impact of its message.<sup>32</sup> It is about *total forgiveness*. Verses 6–9 contain an accumulation of terms indicating the effects of forgiveness: YHWH will “heal” his people (cf. Jer 3:22); he will “restore” their fortunes and “rebuild” them; he will “cleanse” them from all their guilt. As in Jeremiah 32, a bright future is envisioned, which is only due to God’s unexpected and undeserved forgiveness: “And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth” (Jer 33:9).

Finally, the message of God’s forgiveness, which paves the way for a new future, is taken up again in the oracle against Babylon, at the end of the book of Jeremiah. Even though an awareness of Israel’s guilt does not lack in this oracle (see 51:5), the emphasis lies on God’s revenge on Babylon, a revenge that will bring salvation to God’s own people. According to Jeremiah 50:4–5, this salvation will apply to God’s people as a whole, both the Israelites and the Judeans. It will include a reunification of the people, repentance, and an everlasting covenant (*berith ‘olam*, cf. 32:40):

In those days and in that time, says the LORD, the people of Israel shall come, they and the people of Judah together; they shall come weeping as they seek the LORD their God. They shall ask the way to Zion, with faces turned toward it, and they shall come and join themselves to the LORD by an everlasting covenant that will never be forgotten. (Jer 50:4–5)

<sup>31</sup> It is for this reason that the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:34 forms one of the strongest links between the Old and New Testament (Jesus’s words of institution of the Holy Supper; 2 Cor 3; Heb 8:6–13; 10:15–18).

<sup>32</sup> “The density of terminology in this verse ... expresses the breathtaking thoroughness of God’s forgiveness” (Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah* 26–52, WBC 27 [Dallas: Word, 1995], 172).

The possibility of this restoration, together with the fact that God's covenant with Israel will be "everlasting," is closely connected to the reality of God's forgiveness, which is proclaimed in Jeremiah 50:19–20. It is not entirely clear how this connection is to be interpreted. Does God forgive because Israel seeks him, or does Israel seek him because God has made this possible through his forgiveness? A reading of the text in a wider context seems to favor the latter interpretation. God's graceful intervention is the foundation for the coming to YHWH and the return to Zion. He himself brings his people back (v. 19) and grants them his radical forgiveness (v. 20):

In those days and at that time, says the LORD, iniquity of Israel shall be sought, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and none shall be found; for I will pardon the remnant that I have spared.<sup>33</sup>

The same pair of verbs, "to search" (*bqsh*, בָּקַשׁ) and "to find" (*mts'*, מָצָא), was used in Jeremiah 5:1, but there is a significant contrast. While at the time of Jeremiah's quest in Jerusalem no righteous person could be found (5:1), the negative result of this new quest will be totally different: no sin shall be found (50:20). Here a glorious gospel is expressed against the backdrop of a land in ruin and a people filled with guilt and shame. The message of God's complete forgiveness opens the door, a gateway to the future.

## V. Development in the Book of Jeremiah

The passages that explicitly address God's forgiveness (*slkh*, סָלַח) reveal three different ideas: a) the possibility of forgiveness, if Israel repents, b) no more forgiveness, because Israel does not repent, c) but yet, forgiveness, through God's initiative. The question to be answered here is whether this development can also be traced elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah.

<sup>33</sup> On the relation between sections 50:4–7 and 50:19–20, cf. Christoph Levin, *Die Verheissung des Neuen Bundes in ihrem theologiegeschichtlichen Zusammenhang ausgelegt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 193–94; O'Kennedy, "Divine Forgiveness," 741. The text does not explicate the relation between the people seeking YHWH (vv. 4–5) and God's forgiveness (vv. 19–20), but the context strongly suggests that the former is made possible by the latter (rather than the other way around). Cf. Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 26–52*, HThKAT 39 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005), 580: "Es wäre ein Fehlschluss anzunehmen, das Volk begehe keine Fehler mehr und sei deswegen ohne Schuld. Der wahre Grund für den neuen, reinen Zustand der Gemeinschaft liegt bei Gott." (It would be a false conclusion to assume that the people would not commit a mistake anymore and would thus be without guilt. The true ground for this new, pure state of the community lay in God.).

Jeremiah Unterman argues that in the thoughts of the historical prophet on repentance and restoration three stages can be identified.<sup>34</sup> During the reign of Josiah, the young prophet still believed in the possibility of repentance, which he saw as a condition for forgiveness and redemption. In the second stage, in the period between the first and the second capture of Jerusalem, Jeremiah started to doubt whether the people were able to repent, and thus he put a growing emphasis on the sovereign mercy of God. The final stage came after Jerusalem's destruction, when the prophet was convinced that redemption would be solely the work of God, on the basis of his unconditional forgiveness. While in Unterman's view the period of King Jehoiakim plays no role, Hetty Lalleman-de Winkel assumes that it was precisely in this period that the decisive turning point in Jeremiah's preaching occurred. She argues that after Jehoiakim had burned the scroll with Jeremiah's prophecies (Jer 36), "a hopeful future could only be made possible by God."<sup>35</sup>

Such specific periodizations of Jeremiah's preaching are problematic, however, in view of the fact that many passages in the book are difficult to date and because of the book's complex structure and history of composition.<sup>36</sup> From the beginning of the book, judgment and salvation occur in tandem. It is impossible to identify with certainty the moment at which YHWH forbade the prophet to intercede for the people or the moment at which Jeremiah came to understand that Israel's future would be based on God's undeserved forgiveness alone.

Even so, the views of Unterman and Lalleman contain a valid point. There is a widely held opinion that (the book of) Jeremiah shows a development with regard to the question of whether judgment can still be averted.<sup>37</sup> It seems quite clear that the prophet initially hoped that this was still possible if the people would just listen to the word of YHWH. This hope was slowly but surely replaced by the conviction that judgment was irreversible, but

<sup>34</sup> Unterman, *From Repentance to Redemption*, 176–77.

<sup>35</sup> Lalleman-de Winkel, *Jeremiah in Prophetic Tradition*, 161.

<sup>36</sup> Fischer, *Der Stand*, 101: "Bei diesen und allen ähnlichen Versuchen, den Wandel in der Botschaft an verschiedenen Zeitpunkten festzumachen, müssen hypothetische Zuordnungen einzelner Sprüche zu bestimmten Phasen des Propheten vorgenommen werden." (With these and all similar attempts to determine the evolution of the message at various times, the hypothetical assignment of individual sayings to specific phases of the prophet must be assumed.)

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Johann J. Stamm, "סלח slh vergeben," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971–1976), 2:157; Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Die Theologie der prophetischen Überlieferungen Israels* (Munich: Kaiser, 1961), 2:220–223; James McKeown, "Forgiveness," in Boda and McConville, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, 255; Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).



the prophet did not lose all hope. He gradually learned that, after judgment, a new future was possible because YHWH would keep his covenant with Israel. Such a development is consistent with the passages on forgiveness discussed above. Those presenting the possibility of averting judgment (through God's forgiveness, in response to the people's repentance) probably date from the early period of Jeremiah's ministry (Jer 2–6, 36; see section II above). A later date may be attached to the passages that make clear that this way was closed due to Israel's stubbornness (Jer 8–20; see section III above). Finally, the passages proclaiming the wonderful turnaround due to God's forgiveness probably also come from a later period (Jer 30, 33, 50; see section IV above).

## Conclusion

Although the root *slkh* does not occur very frequently in the Old Testament and a uniform notion of divine forgiveness is lacking, Hannes Olivier rightly argues that “nothing said about God is as important as that he forgives sins.”<sup>38</sup> Forgiveness paves the way for the removal of sin and the restoration of the covenant, the communion between God and his people. The theme of divine forgiveness—apart from its use in cultic/liturgical contexts—occurs particularly in the literature of the late pre-exilic and exilic period.<sup>39</sup> During this time of crisis, a deepened sense of evil and iniquity arises, together with a stronger feeling of the necessity of forgiveness.

This becomes especially clear in the book of Jeremiah, which reveals a fundamental trait of the Old Testament image of God. YHWH is the God who longs for the reestablishment of the relationship with his people. He gladly forgives, as is indicated by the question form of verses like Jeremiah 5:1, 9, 29, and 9:8, and by the use of the word *'ulai* (אולי), “maybe” in Jeremiah 36:3–7. At the same time, the book makes clear that forgiveness is never easy or cheap. God is a gracious God who offers forgiveness, but in order to receive this forgiveness, Israel must meet certain conditions. Reconciliation

<sup>38</sup> Hannes P. J. Olivier, “סלח,” in Willem A. VanGemenen, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 3:260. Pace Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 1936), 208: “Die alttestamentliche Offenbarung ... spricht überhaupt nur gelegentlich und ganz ohne sie in den Mittelpunkt ihrer Aussagen des Heils zu nehmen von der Vergebung. So spielt bei den älteren Propheten die Vergebung überhaupt keine Rolle.” (The Old Testament revelation ..., on the whole, speaks about forgiveness only occasionally and without taking it as the mid-point of its statement about salvation. Thus, in the older prophets, forgiveness plays no role at all.)

<sup>39</sup> Horst D. Preuss, *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Israels Weg mit JHWH* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992), 2:197.



requires repentance and confession of sin. Forgiveness as the nullification of guilt and the relinquishment of punishment can only be given if God's people confess their guilt and repent from their evil ways. When these conditions are not fulfilled, God draws a line and forbids intercession. The possibility of forgiveness disappears, and judgment can no longer be averted, regardless of how much the people exhaust themselves in religious maneuvers. Heaven is closed. There is then, however, a wonderful turnaround, a breakthrough, based in God's own heart and in his compassion for his people (Jer 31:20). God does not forgive because of the repentance of his people, but he forgives because he is a gracious and loving God. YHWH himself paves the way for forgiveness, for the restoration. "Forgiveness is an essential feature of the new covenant and the days of restoration."<sup>40</sup> This forgiveness is not an abstract idea and is not restricted to spiritual blessings, but it pertains to the restoration of earthly blessings and the rebuilding of a community as well.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, we see in the book of Jeremiah, against the backdrop of a battle for life and death, the movement that is essentially the foundation of the biblical message and the Christian faith. In the first place, God longingly turns to his people to forgive them and restore the relationship. Secondly, man blocks the restoration through his lack of repentance and persistence in evil. But then again, in the third place, God sovereignly intervenes to make the impossible possible, a life with him, through his forgiveness. God's deepest being is moved for people and his creation, and he does not forsake the works of his hands. It is this movement—God who gladly forgives, God who can no longer forgive, and God who persists in his love and forgives completely—that was accomplished fully in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>40</sup> O'Kennedy, "Divine Forgiveness," 743.

<sup>41</sup> Preuss, *Theologie*, 197.