Forgiveness in the Prophecy of Judgment

E. C. JOHN

The history of Hebrew prophetic message can be divided into the prophecy of judgment and the prophecy of salvation or well-being (*Heil*). Broadly speaking, the message of judgment extends from the beginning of the prophetic movement in Israel to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The message of *Heil* begins with Second Isaiah in the exile, after the judgment pronounced by the 'former prophets' (Zech. 1: 4) had overtaken the two States of Israel and Judah.

A word may be said to qualify this broad division of prophecy into a pre-exilic prophecy of judgment and a post-exilic prophecy of salvation. It does not mean that the prophetic message in pre-exilic Israel consisted solely of judgment, nor that the message of judgment is altogether absent even in Second Isaiah. Neither does it imply that all the passages of Heil in the 'former prophets' are to be held unauthentic. Only by a detailed investigation of the form, content, etc., of each of such passages can one establish whether a particular message of salvation is pre-exilic or post-exilic. In Amos there is hardly any message of salvation.[1] Hosea speaks of God's gracious turning to the people only after the judgment has taken place (2 : 16 ff.; 14 : 2 ff.). Isaiah challenges Ahaz to exercise the role of the deliverer in the *Jahwekrieg*[2] by asking God for a sign of deliverance as Gideon did (Judg. 6 : 36 ff.) and in doing so he was acting in the manner of a Heilsprophet. There are genuine oracles of salvation in Jeremiah, as is reflected in his letter to the exiled community (ch. 29), in his exhortation to individual Israelites to capitulate to the enemy and to save their naked lives (34 : 4 f.; 38 : 2, 17 f.) and in the message he spoke in connection with the buying of his cousin's property (32 : 15*b*, 17*a*, 24 ff.). It remains, however, true to say that except for Isa. 9 : 1–6; ch. 11 (whose authenticity is disputed) a message of salvation consisting of the restoration of the nation with the return from the

[1] Würthwein holds that Amos's oracles against the nations belong to the period when Amos was a Heilsprophet ('Amos Studien' in *Z.A.W.*, 62, 1950, pp. 10–52).

[2] The term *Jahwekrieg* (Yahweh's war) is more appropriate than the term 'holy war' (von Rad). *See* R. Smend, *Jahwekrieg und Stämmebund*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966.

exile, and a reconstituted monarchy and nation begins only after the judgment has run its course with the fall of Samaria and of Jerusalem.[3]

The pre-exilic canonical prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, felt constrained to pronounce judgment on the sinful nation.[4] The core of their message of judgment consists of the divine decision to destroy the people of God, resulting in the death of the nation.[5] Whereas the prophecy of judgment before Amos was directed to individuals, particularly the ruling king, and not to the nation, with Amos prophecy takes a new turn in that it is directed mainly to the whole nation (the two States of Israel and Judah) and only very rarely to particular individuals.[6]

Before entering into the subject of forgiveness in the prophecy of judgment it is necessary to examine the form and structure of the oracles of judgment. Of the different forms (*Gattungen*) employed by the prophets to pronounce judgment, H. Gunkel had recognized two forms as most important: the threat (*Drohrede*), i.e. oracles which speak of imminent judgment, and the reproach (*Scheltrede*), i.e. passages where the prophets give the reason for the threat.[7] Gunkel regarded only the 'threat' as the actual word of God, whereas 'reproach' he attributed to the prophets themselves as 'thinkers (*Denker*)'. That is, in the reproach the prophets were discovering the moral reason for the threat they had to proclaim. H. W. Wolff, by examining the form and syntax of such oracles, has recognized a closer connection than Gunkel had observed between the threat and reproach and the latter he calls the 'reason (*Begründung*)'.[8] He says: 'In this manner the prophet makes clear to the people how every happening is the necessary outcome of a cause.'[9] C. Westermann has continued the investigation and has established that what has so far been called 'reproach' and 'threat' are not two separate forms of speech (*Gattungen*) but integral parts of one and the same Gattung, which he calls 'pronouncement of judgment (*Gerichtsankündigung*)'.[10] He distinguishes the two types of the pronouncement of judgment, namely

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[3] So Jeremiah's message of *Heil* to the Northern Israel (3 : 12 ff.; 31 : 16 ff.) and Second Isaiah's message to the exiled community. On the different types of the message of *Heil see* C. Westermann, 'The Way of Promise through the Old Testament', in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. by B. W. Anderson, London, S.C.M. Press, 1964.

[4] *See* especially Amos 9 : 1–4; Hos. 9 : 11 f.; Mic. 3 : 8; Isa. 9 : 11, etc.

[5] Cf. Amos 5 : 2; Isa. 5 : 14; Jer. 9 : 20 f. *See* my dissertation, *Death and Life in the Prophecy of Judgment*, Heidelberg, 1968.

[6] *See* C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*. (Eng. trans. of the German work, *Grundformen Prophetischen Rede*), London, Lutterworth Press, 1967, pp. 137 f.

[7] *RGG*[1], 4, 1913, p. 1884.

[8] 'Die Begründungen der prophetischen Heils—und Unheilssprüche', in *Z.A.W.*, 52, 1934, pp. 1–22, reprinted in his *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, München, Chr. Kaiser, 1964, pp. 9–35.

[9] *Gesammelte Studien*, p. 14.

[10] *Op. cit.* Wolff in his later works, e.g. in his commentaries *Hosea* and *Amos* (Biblischer Kommentar), employs a similar term, pronouncement of punishment (*Strafankündigung*).

those addressed to the individuals (e.g. 2 Sam. 12 : 1–15; 1 Kgs. 21 : 17–24; Amos 7 : 16 f.) and those addressed to the nation or people as a whole (e.g. Isa. 8 : 6–8; Jer. 5 : 10 ff., etc.). The judgment on individuals has two parts: first, the accusation or indictment (*Anklage*) giving the reason (*Begründung*) for the judgment (e.g. 1 Kgs. 21 : 19: 'Have you killed, and also taken possession?'; Amos 7 : 16*b*, etc.), and secondly, the corresponding judgment (e.g. 1 Kgs. 21 : 19: 'In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood'; Amos 7 : 17, etc.).[11] Westermann holds that the pronouncement of judgment on the nation exhibits the same structure of accusation and judgment and is a further development of the judgment pronounced on individuals, whereby both the elements of accusation and punishment are elaborated. The accusation is elaborated, because the nation has been guilty, not of one specific crime alone, but of a series of crimes committed over a period of time. Their cumulative result is that God is forced to enter into judgment. The actual pronouncement of judgment develops into two parts: the intervention of God in the first person singular (e.g. Isa. 8 : 7: 'Therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, . . .') and the result of the intervention in terms of what will actually happen, described in the third person (e.g. Isa. 8 : 7 f.: 'And it will rise over all its channels . . . , it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck').[12]

The form-critical investigations, reviewed above, have shown that the pronouncements of judgment, whether on individuals or on the nation, have two inseparable basic elements, the accusation and the fitting punishment, which God will execute. The prophets, as messengers of God, list the charges and pronounce the divine punishment. Forgiveness in the prophecy of judgment, then, has to be examined against the logical sequence of accusation and punishment.

The theme of forgiveness occurs in two of the narrative texts in 2 Samuel (chs. 12 and 24) within the context of the prophecy of judgment.

The text of 2 Sam. 12 : 1–14 as it stands shows signs of subsequent elaboration.[13] It is most likely that the original narrative consisted of the parable of the rich and poor man (vv. 1–4), David's pronouncement of judgment on the crime committed by the rich man ('the man who has done this deserves to die', v. 5), Nathan identifying the criminal as none other than David himself ('you are the man', v. 7), the charges against David (killing of Uriah and taking his wife Bathsheba, v. 9), David's confession of guilt ('I have

[11] *Basic Forms*, pp. 129 ff.

[12] *Op. cit.*, pp. 169 ff.

[13] Signs of the secondary elaboration of the story can be recognized in vv. 7*b*–8, 10–12, which contain double accusation and double punishment. *See* J. Wellhausen, *Der Text der Bücher Samuelis*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1872, p. 184; S. Herner, *Sühne und Vergebung in Israel*, Lund, 1941, p. 71; H. W. Hetzberg, *1 and 2 Samuel* (Old Testament Library), London, S.C.M. Press, 1964, p. 314.

sinned against Yahweh', v. 13*a*), the declaration of forgiveness (v. 13*b*), and the reduction of his punishment (David comes to the terrible realization that his crime is a breach of the sacral law which deserves capital punishment). As a consequence God's anger would be kindled and he must face imminent death. Therefore, he begs for God's mercy by confessing his guilt in the ancient formula of confession: חטאתי ליהוה (v. 13*a*)[14] (*ḥāṭāthī l*ᵉ*yāhweh*). Nathan announces to him the declaration of divine forgiveness: גם־יהוה לא תמות העביר חטאתך (v. 13*b*) (*gam Yahweh he'*ᵉ*bhīr haṭṭāth*ᵉ*khā lō' thāmūth.*). Yahweh has overlooked[15] David's sin and the judgment pronounced on him is withdrawn. Forgiveness here is the 'passing by' or 'overlooking' the offence and therefore cancellation of the punishment. However, it is not a total cancellation of the punishment, only a reduction of it. David's son, reckoned as his property, has to die.[16] The narrative gives the impression that forgiveness resulting in a cancellation or reduction of punishment was not expected as a matter of course.

The second passage (2 Sam. 24) does not actually deal with the prophecy of judgment. However, the context is that of impending punishment on David in which David confesses his guilt (vv. 10, 17) in the same words as in 2 Sam. 12 : 13*a*. David also asks to be forgiven, recalling the declaration of forgiveness in 2 Sam. 12 : 13*b*: העבר־נא את־עון עבדך (24 : 10; cf. Zech. 3 : 4) (*ha-'*ᵃ*bher-nā' 'eth-'*ᵃ*wōn 'abhd*ᵉ*khā*). Gad the prophet communicates to David the divine answer to his petition. It is a choice of three different punishments, death of the nation by famine, sword or pestilence. Of the three David chooses pestilence so that he may remain within Yahweh's punishing hand. It is not until the destroying angel reaches Jerusalem at the threshing floor of Araunah (v. 16) that one reads of Yahweh's relenting from the total execution of punishment: וינחם יהוה אל־הרעה (*wayyinnāḥem Yahweh 'el-hārā'āh*). The narrative as it stands deals with the *hieros logos* of the building of the altar of Yahweh in Jerusalem. It shows, however, that the answer for the petition for forgiveness is not a total cancellation of punishment, but only a choice of what David thinks will be a milder punishment. The pestilence is not ended by David's prayer, but by a free divine act of mercy.[17] The prayer of David is aimed at a change in the disposition of God that he may not execute the punishment which should otherwise follow on the crime.

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[14] Cf. Gen. 20 : 9; 39 : 9, etc. On the fixed character of this confession formula, *see* R. Knierim, *Die Hauptbegriffe für Sünde im Alten Testament*, Güterslohe, Gerd Mohn, 1965, pp. 21 ff.

[15] For the same figurative use of this expression, *see* 2 Sam. 24 : 10 (= 1 Chron. 21 : 8) and Job 7 : 21 and J. J. Stamm, *Erlösen und Vergeben im Alten Testament*, Bern, A. Francke A.-G., 1940, pp. 70 ff.

[16] The works of D. Daube (*Studies in Biblical Law*, London, 1947; *Sin Ignorance and Forgiveness in the Bible*, London; *The Liberal Jewish Synagogue*, 1960) and J. Scharbert (*Solidarität im Segen und Fluch im Alten Testament und in seiner Umwelt*, I, Bonn, 1958) were inaccessible to me.

[17] *See* Hertzberg, *ad. loc.* The latter is an integral element of the *hieros logos* of the founding of the altar of the Jerusalem temple.

As representatives of the prophets of judgment in pre-exilic Israel, I have chosen four prophets, Amos and Hosea who prophesied in the Northern State of Israel and Isaiah and Jeremiah in the Southern State of Judah.

Amos

Amos's intercessory prayer found in the autobiographical narrative of his visions is a petition for divine forgiveness: 'O Lord Yahweh, forgive, I pray thee (סלח־נא) (*s^{e}laḥ-nā'*), how can Jacob stand, he is so small?' (7 : 2, cf. v. 5).

A word needs to be said about the visions as a whole. There are five visions in all (7 : 1–3, 4–6, 7–8; 8 : 1–2; 9 : 1–4). Between the narration of the third and fourth visions the account of Amos's encounter with Amaziah is inserted, and a series of oracles intervene between the narration of the fourth and the fifth. The first four visions begin with the words: 'Thus the Lord Yahweh showed me', and the last with the words: 'I saw the Lord . . .' The form of the first two are the same and their content similar. Amos sees a natural phenomenon of destruction: the spring herbage of April being completely eaten up by the locusts leaving no fodder till the following December, and the fire devouring the deep springs under the earth and finishing up the dry land as well. There is no interpretation of the vision in either case. The prophet intercedes on behalf of the people to avert the destruction, God relents and says: 'It shall not be.' The second vision presupposes the first as shown by the divine answer: '*Even* this shall not be' (v. 6).

The third and fourth visions share the same form, and their contents are also similar. In the third, Amos sees a man standing beside a wall with a plummet in his hand,[18] and in the fourth, a basket of summer fruits. A new element now appears, not found in the first two visions, namely Yahweh asking the prophet what he is seeing and Amos's answer, which is followed by God's disclosure to the prophet about the interpretation of the vision, 'I am about to set a plummet in the midst of my people Israel' (v. 8), and, 'the end has come to my people Israel' (8 : 2).[19] The vision closes each time with the disclosure of the divine determination not to forgive the people any more (לא אוסיף עוד עבור לו) (*lō' 'ōsīph 'ōdh 'abhor lō*). The prophet recognizes that God's verdict of punishment is final and irrevocable. A development can be observed between the third and the fourth visions. Whereas in the third, punishment is pronounced only as imminent future

[18] Verse 7 should be emended to read: 'Thus the Lord Yahweh showed me: Behold one standing beside the wall with a plummet in his hand.' The word rendered 'plummet' occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. Judged by the context it should be understood as a tool for destroying the wall.

[19] The play on the words קיץ (*qyṣ*) and קץ (*qṣ*) is obvious. What is significant is that קץ (*qṣ*) denotes the end, and thereby the death of the nation (Jer. 51 : 13; Ezek. 7 : 2, 3, 6; Lam. 4 : 18; Gen. 6 : 13) or the death of an individual (Ps. 39 : 5; Job 6 : 11; Dan. 9 : 26; 11 : 45).

(subject followed by participle, Ges K § 116p), in the fourth it is pronounced as already taking place (perfect of certainty, Ges K § 106n).

The fifth vision though different in form and content from the others is only an elaboration of the twofold aspects of divine verdict and execution of punishment on the nation, already implied in the earlier visions. The prophet sees Yahweh standing on (or beside) the altar giving command to destroy every single Israelite with none escaping. The prophet watches and listens silently. He does not intercede, nor are any questions put to him.[20]

The form and structure of the visions show that these are essentially visions of judgment. Amos has narrated them in order to defend his stand as a prophet of judgment. In the face of opposition he legitimizes his message by stating how God had shown him in the visions the imminent and irrevocable punishment.[21]

In reporting the visions Amos points out that he had mediated twice and that in both instances God had withheld punishment (7 : 2 f., 5 f.). The natural calamities depicted in the first two visions are occasions when the people would gather at the sanctuary in communal lament (cf. Joel 1 : 4 ff.).[22] An essential element of the lament is the petition to Yahweh in the imperative to move him to turn to the people in mercy.[23] In this instance the verdict of divine punishment is intimated to Amos alone. He, therefore, pleads with God not to execute punishment.[24] As a result of the prophet's mediation Yahweh is moved by pity, he relented and assured the prophet that the punishment has been withheld.

The petition of Amos, here playing the role of a Heilsprophet, occurs between the verdict of judgment and the execution of it.[25] Nothing is said about the forgiveness of sins, as such, only of a change in God's attitude and the consequent cancellation of the judgment God intended to bring about. Stamm observes rightly: 'Vergebung erscheint sonach zum ersten Mal in der Form der Bitte. Was diese erwirkt, ist aber nicht Vergebung der Sünde Jakobs, es ist vielmehr eine Umstimmung Jahwes, sodass er das drohende Unheil noch hinausschiebt.'[26] In other words, forgiveness does not consist of a total change of attitude on the part of God so that

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[20] On the gradual intensification of the visions *see* L. Alonso-Schokel, 'Die stilistische Analyse bei den Propheten', in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, VII, 1960, pp. 152–164.

[21] Cf. 7 : 14 f. where Amos narrates his call to legitimize his prophecy of judgment. Knierim has observed the same motive in the report of Isaiah's visions (ch. 6), 'The Vocation of Isaiah', in *Vetus Testamentum*, XVIII 1968, pp. 47–68.

[22] *See* Gunkel-Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, ²1966, pp. 117 ff.

[23] *Op. cit.*, pp. 128 ff.

[24] Cf. the similar role of Moses in Exod. 33 : 30; Num. 14 : 13–19; of Abraham in Gen. 20 : 7 where he is designated as a prophet whose intercession has power to avert the judgment of death.

[25] For the same sequence *see* 2 Sam. 12 : 13 f. considered above.

[26] J. J. Stamm, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

a new stage of God turning in mercy in the subsequent history of the people is initiated as in Second Isaiah (Isa. 50 : 2).

The original meaning of סלח (*slḥ*) in Hebrew is uncertain. Its only occurrence in a Ugaritic text does not help because the text is fragmentary (Gordon Text 9 : 1). In the parallel petition in Amos 7 : 5, another verb is employed, חדל (*ḥdhl*), which means 'to stand aloof'[27] which supports the meaning, here suggested, as an action on the part of God not to execute punishment. This is in agreement with Lam. 3 : 42 where סלח (*slḥ*) occurs in the same general context. The people complain to God because God has not withheld punishment, but has poured out his fury without any mercy. Between the sequence of sin and God's punishment on it, a sequence which is presupposed throughout in the Lamentations, the people feel sore that no forgiveness has been shown.

The third and fourth visions show that God will not hold back the punishment:

> Behold I am about to set a plumbline in the midst of my people Israel, I will never again pass by them (7 : 8). The end has come to my people Israel, I will never again pass by them (8 : 2).

Because God will not pass by (forgive) them any more, the punishment will surely take place. The prophet's intercession can no longer work a change of mind on the part of God to hold back the punishment.

Amos shows in his pronouncements of judgment that there will be no escape from punishment. The punishment will be so extensive as to stretch from Hamath to Arabah (6 : 14). Only as much as a piece of bone or bit of the ear will be left, only as evidence that the people once existed, as the hired shepherd shows evidence that the sheep has been eaten by a wild animal (3 : 12). God's determination to punish is expressly stated when Yahweh says: 'Surely I will never forget any of their deeds' (8 : 7), or when one reads in the oracles on the nations: 'For three transgressions and for four ... I will not take it back'[28] (1 : 3, 6, 13; 2 : 1: The oracles on Tyre, Edom and Judah are generally regarded as secondary).

Forgiveness then, in Amos, is a happening that comes between God's determination to punish and the carrying out of the punishment, so that God withholds the judgment which should otherwise have fallen on the people. God's forgiveness may temporarily withhold punishment, but it does not establish a new stage in which

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[27] For this meaning of the root חדל (*ḥdl*) *see* D. W. Thomas, 'Some Observations on the Hebrew Root חרל (*ḥdl*)', in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, IV, 1957, pp. 8–16.

[28] Wellhausen suggested that the antecedent of the third mas. sing. suffix in אשיבנו (*'ašībhennu*) refers to the punishment which is pronounced and he is followed by many commentators and also by the RSV. ('I will not revoke the punishment'). H. W. Wolff (*BK*, p. 168) proposes that in keeping with the analogous passages like 7 : 2 f., 5, the third mas. sing. suffix refers to the word of God as such proclaiming judment on Israel.

God sets a new relationship between him and the people. Forgiveness is not a restoration of broken fellowship, as forgiveness is often understood,[29] but a withholding of the punishment, so that people may be spared from the judgment.

Hosea

Hosea speaks directly of forgiveness only once. It is in the form of a statement by the people to God within the context of a penitential act (14 : 2 ff.). Hosea formulates a confession 'ad hoc'[30] and asks the people to recite it. The penitential act is to begin with the statement: 'Thou dost take away (forgive) iniquity.'[31] Whether we understand it as a statement about God (Wolff) or as a petition (RSV), the setting of forgiveness is within the context of a penitential act (cultic). Israel has already suffered, being punished on account of its iniquity.[32] Now Israel returns to God after her fall, to avert further disaster.

God may remember the עון (*ʿwn*) (8 : 13; 9 : 9), or עון (*ʿwn*) may be stored up (10 : 10) and punishment would follow. Now Israel acknowledges that God may remove the עון (*ʿwn*) and free them from punishment.

Apart from this one text there is no reference directly or indirectly to forgiveness in Hosea. One possible exception might be the divine lament in 11 : 8 f. which speaks of the divine hesitation to make a total destruction.

Whereas in Amos forgiveness means practically 'holding back' or 'withholding' punishment, the only occurrence in Hosea suggests removal of the offence which gives rise to divine judgment. A related idea is the healing of apostasy (14 : 5) though not the same as forgiveness as claimed by Herner.[33] Hosea presupposes that returning to God is the way of healing and restoration, but his indictment against the people is that they do not return (7 : 10, 14; 11 : 5 cf. 6 : 1 ff.).[34]

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[29] So, e.g., Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testament*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961, Teil 2/3, pp. 308 ff.

[30] Knierim, *Hauptbegriffe für Sünde*, p. 203.
Detailed examination of vocabulary and content lends support to the view that the whole passage is probably worked out in the Hoseanic circle rather than by Hosea himself. E.g., Israel's defection to Baal worship, which is specified very concretely by Hosea in his indictments, is here represented as worship of other gods, work of men's hands, which is characteristic of the deuteronomic circles, Second Isaiah and the Psalms.

[31] This is a more correct rendering of the imperfect. Whether we understand it as a statement about God (Wolff) or as a petition (RSV) the setting of forgiveness is within the context of a penitential cultic act.

[32] *See* verse 2; cf. 13 : 12; *see also* 8 : 13; 9 : 9. For mention of עון (*ʿwn*) as the reason for the divine punishment, *see* Knierim, *op. cit.*, pp. 197 f., 224.

[33] *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

[34] H. W. Wolff, 'Das Thema Umkehr in der alttestamentlichen Prophetie', in *Z.Th.K.*, 48, 1951, pp. 129–148 and *Gesammelte Studien*, pp. 120–150.

Isaiah

The idea of forgiveness occurs in Isaiah in three different contexts and *Gattungen*. First in the vision of judgment. As already observed with regard to the visions of Amos, Isaiah's vision, too, is essentially a vision of judgment and not, as is often stated, a vision of his call. In the vision Isaiah comes to realize the terrible judgment of Judah (cf. hardening in vv. 9 f.). The prophet is asked to bring about doom without a possibility of restoration. It is so terrible that he is forced to cry in lament: 'how long?'[35]

At the vision of God in his majesty Isaiah cries in anxiety,

Woe to me,[36] I must perish[37]
I am a man of unclean lips,
I dwell amidst people of unclean lips
Mine eyes have seen the King Yahweh Sebaoth.

Isaiah makes a confession in anguish, in the face of judgment, both for himself and for the people. The confession is not about anything he has done and does not conform to the traditional pattern. What follows is a ceremony of purification. The seraph touches his lips with the burning coals from the altar and says to the prophet:

'Behold this has touched your lips,
Your guilt is removed and your sin expiated (atoned).'

Nothing has been said so far explicitly about Isaiah's sin or guilt, except the assumption that the uncleanness of his lips makes him keep silent and prevents him join in the praise of the enthroned Yahweh. It is possible to assume also that he feels doomed to die because he is suddenly in the presence of God.[38] The purification ceremony frees him from sin and presumably from death as well, and qualifies him to pronounce the message of judgment to the people. The prophet's forgiveness is declared in a declaratory formula familiar in P (Lev. 4 : 20, 26, etc.) and it is effected by the merit of the atoning power of the burning coal of the altar. The term כפר, here employed, is a 'cultic technical term'[39] for expiation. With Isaiah we are not in a specifically prophetic tradition but in the priestly atoning tradition of the Jerusalem temple.

The second reference to forgiveness in Isaiah (22 : 14) is also a divine declaration, this time, however, the contrary to the former.

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[35] For 'how long?' as a fixed element in laments, *see* Ps. 6 : 4; 74 : 10, etc.

[36] אוי (*'wy*) is a cry in anguish and fear, whereas הוי (*hwy*), primarily used in funeral dirges, introduces an oracle on judgment on groups. Cf. Westermann, *Basic Forms*, pp. 190 ff., and G. Wanke, 'אוי (*'wy*) und הוי (*hwy*)' in *Z.A.W.*, **78**, 1966, pp. 215–218.

[37] For the meaning of the root to mean 'destroy' in the Qal stem, and 'perish' in the Niphal, *see* Hosea 4 : 5 f.; 10 : 7, 15; Isa. 15 : 1; Jer. 47 : 5, etc.

[38] Cf. Ex. 33 : 20; 19 : 21; Judg. 6 : 22 f.

[39] *See* L. Köhler, *Old Testament Theology* (Eng. trans.), London, Lutterworth Press, 1957, pp. 212 f. Köhler says that the term does not occur in the pre-exilic prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah or Micah. However, this needs correction as far as Isaiah is concerned.

There will be no forgiveness and, therefore, the people have to suffer the punishment of death. The context is the humiliating defeat in which people have died disgracefully and fled for life. This disaster is viewed by the prophet as a sign that Yahweh has removed his shield from Judah. It makes him take up the customary mourning rites. However, people are feasting and are in jubilation, because they expect death any moment. For this guilt there is no pardon, only the punishment of premature death which they are expecting. Pardon of guilt or atonement is understood as that which can come between the guilt and the punishment so as to avert the punishment, and the terminology as in the previous passage is what is characteristic of P.

The thought of forgiveness occurs in the problematic passage of Isaiah 1 : 18–20.

> 'Come, let us hold a legal dispute, says Yahweh.
> If your sins are like purple, could they be regarded white like snow?
> If they are red like crimson, could they be like wool?
> If you are willing and obedient, should you eat the food of the land?
> If you refuse and rebel, should you be devoured by the sword . . .' [40]

The passage is not a message of Heil, but is to be regarded with Boecker[41] as an 'appeal to the introduction of an ascertaining process (Appellation zur Einleitung eines Festatellungsverfahrens)'. Two possibilities are mentioned and the judicial process has to establish the one or the other. In other words, disputable statements are made which are to be cleared by the process. Isaiah attacks the claims of the people that their sins could be atoned, just as they think that they are pleasing God by the regular performance of the cult. Isaiah, however, holds that their sin deserves punishment. Regarding the future as open he presents both the possibilities of blessing and punishment (vv. 19 f.).[42]

The text shows the prevalence of cultic atoning rites whose validity Isaiah does not question, as such, but he denies the possibility of forgiveness by expiation for the sins the people are guilty of.

The forgiveness of which Isaiah speaks belongs to the cultic tradition of the Jerusalem temple (cf. Ezek. 36 : 25). By the

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[40] The above rendering is based on Wildberger, *BK*, pp. 50 ff. RSV follows LXX. LXX in v. 18*b* is clearly an unconditional forgiveness, and it is followed by many commentators, e.g. Ziegler, Hertzberg, Kaiser, etc. But Duhm had raised the problem in such an interpretation: 'Never does Isaiah offer the people such a forgiveness of sin in anticipation.' (*Das Buch Jesaia*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 5 Aufl., 1968, p. 32).

[41] *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament*, Neukirchen, Neukirchener Verlag, 1964, pp. 68 f.

[42] Wilderger (*op. cit.*) is inclined to conclude that the situation is that of a convenant festival, especially in the last two lines, but as we know very little about it from the period of Isaiah, he does not press the point.

atoning rites people expect to be freed from the calamity that would otherwise overtake them. Isaiah is clear that the expiatory rites would not be able to avert the terrible judgment he has been called to pronounce. For him, too, forgiveness is a happening that comes between the evil deed and its punishment.

Jeremiah

Like Amos Jeremiah appears in the role of an interceding mediator. This finds its clearest expression in 15 : 1:

> 'Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people.'

Similarly in 11 : 14:

> 'Therefore 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.' [43]

From Jeremiah one learns of two other means for procuring forgiveness from Yahweh by the people, by the petition of the people in communal lament and by sacrificial rites. So in the passage quoted above, 'I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble', and in 5 : 15: 'Can . . . sacrificial flesh avert your doom?'

For the communal petition for forgiveness one may quote 14 : 7:

> 'Though our iniquities testify against us,
> act O Yahweh for thy name's sake
> for our backslidings are many,
> we have sinned against thee.'

The answer received in this case is the opposite of forgiveness:

> 'He will remember their guilt and punish their sins' (v. 10*b*).

This is elaborated further in another oracle:

'Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and cereal offering, I will not accept them; but I will consume them by sword, by famine and by pestilence' (14 : 12; cf. 15 : 2). Within the context of the communal lament, as in Amos, the prophet appears in the role of the mediating intercessor. The attendant rites of the communal lament consisting of the rites of fasting, sacrifices and the people's petition are referred to here, all aimed at turning away the divine anger, but they are all denied to the people by the true prophet of God. It is only the false prophets who could say in answer to the communal lament that sword and famine will not come.

The concept of forgiveness is here as before the cancellation or postponement of punishment. Forgiveness is a free act of God. He is moved by sympathy and does not carry out the judgment he

[43] Cf. 7 : 16 (C); 14 : 11.

had intended to execute. So in proclaiming the judgment the prophet also says in the word of Yahweh:

> 'I am weary of relenting (נלאיתי הנחם) (*nil'ēthī hinnāḥēm*)', 15 : 6 (cf. Amos 7 : 3, 6).

It is clear elsewhere also that forgiveness consists in the cancellation of punishment:

> 'I will not have pity, or spare or have compassion that I should not destroy them' (13 : 14).

Jeremiah's lament also points in the same direction:

> 'Forgive not their iniquity,
> nor blot out their sin from thy sight.
> Let them be overthrown before thee:
> deal with them in the time of thine anger' (18 : 23).[44]

In a dialogue between Yahweh and Jeremiah, Yahweh asks, with regard to the people,

> 'How can I forgive you for this?' (5 : 7).

It may be observed that Jeremiah employs here the same word, סלח (*slḥ*), used by Amos to refer to forgiveness. The opposite of forgiveness is stated a little later in the same passage,

> 'Shall I not punish them for these things?' (5 : 9).

In the following verse Yahweh gives command to bring total destruction of the people.

Lastly, reference may be made to the thought of forgiveness offered as a result of a genuine return on the part of the people to God.

'Perhaps the house of Judah will hear all the calamity which I am planning to execute on them, so that they may return each from his evil conduct and I forgive (סלחתי) (*sālaḥtī*) their iniquity and their sin' (36 : 3). Forgiveness here means as elsewhere quite clearly the cancellation of the punishment.

From this review of the passages in the prophecy of judgment certain conclusions may be drawn as to what the prophets meant when they spoke of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a free act of God, whereby God is moved with pity and does not execute the punishment which he announces through the prophet. Forgiveness is not a category of relationship, but rather one of cancellation or postponement of punishment. This is clear also from the legal structure of the prophecy of judgment. For specific accusations against individuals and the nation, the prophets were impelled to announce the fitting punishment. Forgiveness implies the lifting of the punishment. Forgiveness is not a personal religious experience, but a change in the course of events, a change in the physical condition of the people. They are granted to live on instead of facing a premature death. As the pre-exilic prophets

[44] *See* Neh. 3 : 37; Ps. 109 : 14; ct. Isa. 63 : 25; 44 : 22.

were commissioned to proclaim judgment to the whole nation, forgiveness also concerns the condition of the whole people. This means that forgiveness in the Old Testament cannot be interpreted in one line as a restoration of broken relationship between man and God as is made out by some scholars.[45]

The prophets of judgment also perform the mediatorial function of intercession on behalf of the people, so that God may withhold the punishment. They pronounce the judgment of death verdict on the people, but also plead with God so that the people may be spared from death. Amos and Jeremiah exercised the role of intercessors. The prophets seem to have exercised this function in the penitential acts of the community which included fasting, lament and sacrifices. Isaiah and Jeremiah are aware of seeking forgiveness in the cult by expiatory sacrifices. Their validity is not rejected absolutely, though they are clear that the way of forgiveness through the cult now remains closed.

[45] E.g., Eichrodt, *op. cit.* Other related concepts which need further investigation are the sequence of an evil deed and its consequence, presupposed especially in the wisdom passages, divine anger, etc.

A Letter to the Editor

Sir,

All of the English translators of the Bible (I have consulted nine of them) make a mistake in the translation of John 20:11—except Rieu who seems to have noticed the point I wish to make. The others all write like this (with minor variations), 'Mary stood outside the tomb weeping.' This sounds clear enough: she was 'outside' not just anywhere but near the tomb. But this is not what St. John wrote; he said 'near the tomb, outside'. Why this additional word 'outside'? It is not his way to put in such superfluous words. Looking again at the Greek, *pros tōi mnēmeiōi.* I would suggest that it should be translated 'at' or 'against' the tomb. In fact Mary stood just outside the tomb, leaning her arms against the entrance, and with her face against her arms to ease her tumultuous weeping. Then becoming aware of the angels, she turned her face aside and peered into the tomb; and again, hearing a voice behind her, she merely turned her head and saw someone indistinctly through her tear-dimmed eyes, whom she took to be the gardener—until Jesus uttered her name. Then she turned herself around and recognized the Saviour, whose death was the cause of all those tears, alive and risen from the dead.

Oxford Mission
Calcutta

Yours faithfully
J. C. COWGILL