

PARDON FOR ALL:
ISRAEL AND THE OTHER NATIONS IN MICAH 7:18-20

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“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression
of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our ancestors
from the days of old.”

Micah 7:18–20 (NRSV)

The book of Micah convicts and consoles a devastated people. Its climactic ending, Micah 7:18–20, celebrates YHWH’s forgiveness and restoration of his people. But who are his people?

Interpreters of this pericope usually limit YHWH’s pardon to Israel alone, and modern English translations encourage this view. But subtle clues within the text actually extend restoration far beyond Israel’s borders. Most significant among these are the strategic use of two key words: “their,” which references other nations, and “Abraham,” which triggers remembrance of YHWH’s centuries-earlier promises to bless other nations. Due consideration of these clues yields the conclusion that Micah 7:18–20 proclaims YHWH forgiving and restoring as his people not only Israel, but all the nations on earth.

This paper will first provide an overview of the context and structure of Micah 7:18–20. It will then explain how modern English translations of the Hebrew text obscure the author’s

meaning and encourage a focus on Israel alone. Finally, it will describe how these two key words, “their” and “Abraham,” extend YHWH’s blessing beyond Israel.

Context And Structure

Most scholars agree that the prophet Micah wrote the majority of this book toward the end of the 8th century BCE, and over subsequent centuries redactors amended it to apply the prophet’s teachings to new circumstances in Israel’s history.¹ Micah 7:18–20 is part of a hymn that likely dates to exilic or post-exilic times, as indicated by the speaker’s willingness to acknowledge guilt (7:9) and his reference to building walls (7:11), which recalls the destruction of Jerusalem’s walls in 586 BCE.² The hopeful tone of Micah 7:18–20 would have lent itself for use in cultic celebrations intended to encourage Israel’s exiles.³

Joyce Rilett Wood argues persuasively that Micah has been shaped for use as a drama.⁴ It employs the familiar prophetic backdrop of a court of law. YHWH accuses Israel: “... the Lord has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel” (6:2 TNIV).⁵ Israel has failed to fulfill its covenant with YHWH and has acted unjustly (3:1-2). The accused pleads guilty: “I have sinned against him” (7:9). He seeks to make up for his wrong, asking, “Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (6:7), but concludes

1. Daniel J. Simundson, “The Book of Micah” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 533.

2. Simundson, “The Book of Micah,” 586.

3. Ralph L. Smith, “Micah 7:7-20” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 32 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 58.

4. Joyce Rilett Wood, “Speech and Action in Micah’s Prophecy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (October 2000): 646.

5. See also Micah 1:2, 6:1.

that he cannot make restitution: “I must bear the indignation of the LORD” (7:9). He pleads for clemency.

Within this courtroom drama, YHWH fills multiple roles. He is at once the *wronged party* (6:3–5) and the *prosecutor* (6:2). Further on, YHWH becomes Israel’s anticipated *defender*: “... until he pleads my cause and establishes my right” (7:9). Finally, at the conclusion, YHWH is *judge*.

Micah 7:18–20 captures the moment in this trial just after judgment has been rendered. Employing the common Hebrew poetic technique of parallelism, the accused celebrates a verdict even better than he had hoped for: full pardon not just for Israel, but also for her “enemies,” (7:8,10), the surrounding nations who witnessed this trial and were likewise moved to seek mercy from Israel’s god (7:10,16–17). While it is rare in scripture to extend parallelism beyond two variations,⁶ here in just three verses at least six variations repeat the proclamation of pardon from the beginning of this pericope almost to the end.

This extensive repetition communicates emotion and reinforces the theme of pardon. It also draws readers through a three-fold explanation of the full nature of this pardon. The first third of this text contains the verdict: YHWH will forgive the sins of “the remnant of his possession.” The second third establishes YHWH alone as the judge who acts on the basis of his own character to set things aright. The final third defines just who are the “remnant of his possession:” Israel *and* other nations.

6. Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, (trans. Peter R. Ackroyd, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 57.

Issues In Translation

Most modern English translations of Micah 7:18–20 alter its pronouns.⁷ The following translation of this text in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* renders them literally:⁸

- Line 1 (v. 18) Who is a god like **you**, forgiving iniquity
 Line 2 and passing over the transgression of the remnant of **his** possession?
 Line 3 **He** does not retain **his** anger forever, because **he** delights in mercy.
 Line 4 (v. 19) **He** will turn; **He** will have compassion on **us**; **He** will tread upon **our**
 iniquities.
 Line 5 And **you** will cast into the depths of the sea all of **their** sins.
 Line 6 (v. 20) **You** will produce faithfulness for **Jacob** — mercy toward **Abraham**
 Line 7 Which **you** swore to **our fathers** from days of old.

As the words in bold reveal, this pericope contains baffling shifts in both who is being talked *to* and who is being talked *about*. In Line 1, the speaker is talking *to* YHWH, but then in Line 2, he seems to be talking *about* YHWH, *to* his fellow Israelites. In Line 5, the speaker shifts back to speak *to* YHWH – but now whom is he speaking *about*? Instead of using the same first-person plural pronouns he used in Line 4 to reference himself and all Israel, now the speaker uses a third-person plural pronoun, “their.” Who does “their” refer to?

The majority of modern English translations avoid this puzzle by changing the pronouns in the text to make more consistent the subject talked *to* and the subject talked *about*. Thus, the TNIV renders verse 19 (alterations in bold), “**You** will again have compassion on us/ **you** will tread our sins underfoot/ and hurl **our** iniquities into the depths of the sea.” The NRSV and

7. This includes the NRSV cited above. A notable exception is the NASB, but it joins the NRSV, TNIV, and NKJV in swallowing a key verb, “*yashuv*” (which easily translates as “he will turn”) in the English word “again.”

8. This translation of the Hebrew text relies on the helps in Owens’ *Analytical Key to the Old Testament*. The lines are numbered for convenience in referencing.

NKJV join the NIV in altering the confounding “their” to “our.”⁹ These translations follow the precedent of ancient translations such as the LXX, which reads “our sins.”¹⁰

Some scholars consider the shifting pronouns evidence of textual corruption,¹¹ and thus view these changes as an improvement, clarifying Israel as recipient of God’s pardon. However, there is no need to jump to this all-too-convenient conclusion. Earlier in Micah 7 and in the very next line the author provides an obvious subject for “their” to refer to. The translators’ “improvement” in fact obscures the author’s message.

The “their”

Line 4 (v. 19) He will turn; He will have compassion on us; He will tread upon our iniquities.

Line 5 And you will cast into the depths of the sea all of their sins.

In line 4, the object receiving YHWH’s compassion is “us,” and the object trod upon is “our” iniquities. These pronouns can refer to none other than Israel, as the speaker has consistently represented himself as a fellow member of the focus of YHWH’s complaint throughout Micah. Yet in line 5, the object cast into the sea is not “our” sins but “their” sins. One scholar attributes this change in pronouns to “affective reasons;”¹² another to the speaker’s alternating identification as first a part of the nation of Israel and then merely an observer of it.¹³

There is a far more likely explanation. Scanning backwards we discover in the previous pericope the subject to whom “their” refers: the “nations” (7:16), members of whom “will come

9. The NRSV and NKJV footnotes “their.”

10. Ralph L. Smith, “Micah 7:7-20,” 58.

11. John Merlin Powis Smith, “Micah,” in vol. 24 of *The International Critical Commentary*, (eds S.R. Driver, et al.; Edinburg: Clark, 1948), 155.

12. Ehud Ben Zvi, *Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 179.

13. Louise Pettibone Smith, “The Book of Micah” *Interpretation* 6, no 2 (April 1952), 226.

to you [YHWH] from Assyria to Egypt, and from Egypt to the River, from sea to sea and from mountain to mountain” (7:12). This pericope of Micah 7:8–17 mentions other nations 14 times. Verse 17, the verse just before our pericope begins, graphically portrays these other nations groveling like snakes in the dust before YHWH, awaiting his judgment. This posture strikingly resembles that of Israel herself: “In Beth Ophrah, roll yourselves in the dust. Pass on your way, inhabitants of Shaphir, in nakedness and shame” (1:10–11). Consider also, “I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation” (7:7), and “I must bear the Lord’s indignation” (7:9).

So in the previous pericope, both Israel, referred to in the first person, and other nations, referred to in the third person, assume the same position of prostration. They both appeal to YHWH for mercy. Then in our pericope, pardon is proclaimed for “our” iniquities and “their” sins. If the “our” of line 4 is obviously Israel, then the “their” of line 5 must be the other nations. There is no need to explain away the “their” as a corruption or a fanciful literary device. As James E. Smith writes, “The possessive suffix “their” in the midst of v. 19 suggests that now Micah is praising God that his forgiveness extends even to Gentiles who come trembling before him.”¹⁴

The “their” extends YHWH’s mercy beyond the borders of Israel, encompassing other nations as part of “the remnant of his possession.” Whereas in English, “remnant” implies only a small percentage of the original, in Hebrew this is not necessarily the case. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* defines a remnant as “the portion of a community which is left in the case of a devastating calamity.”¹⁵ This portion could be any percentage of the whole, large or small,

14. James E. Smith, *The Minor Prophets* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1992), electronic edition.

15. I. Jenni, “Remnant” in vol. 4 of *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville : Abingdon, 1976), 32.

or even the entire whole. This is the case in Gen. 45:7, when Joseph’s brothers are referred to as “a remnant,”¹⁶ — they *all* survived the famine. Furthermore, Zech. 9:7, referring to *Philistines*, asserts, “they also will be a remnant for our God.” Based on these insights, one should not assume that the “remnant” referred to in verse 18 consists of a small portion or is derived exclusively from Israel.

“Abraham”

Line 6 (v. 20) You will produce faithfulness for Jacob — mercy toward Abraham
Line 7 Which you swore to our fathers from days of old.

The mention of Jacob and Abraham in line six reinforces the extension of pardon to Israel and other nations asserted in lines 4 and 5. Most commentators view the words “Jacob” and “Abraham” in line 6 as metonymies referencing Israel alone.¹⁷ Those who “correct” that troublesome “their” in line 5 would naturally consider Israel the only possible subject.¹⁸ Even for those aware that the speaker has earlier named two groups receiving God’s pardon would still be inclined to identify these names with Israel. After all, Jacob and Abraham are two of Israel’s honored forefathers.

But why is Jacob named *before* Abraham? This is not chronological. It deviates from the pattern elsewhere in scripture, such as Psalm 105:6, “... offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob...” and Jer. 33:26, “... the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...” Why reverse the order here?

16. G. F. Hasel, “Remnant” in supplementary vol. of *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville : Abingdon, 1976), 735.

17. See Ben Zvi, 184, Ralph L. Smith, 59, and John Merlin Powis Smith, 155.

18. Examples of commentaries on this pericope that “correct” the pronouns and ignore other nations include *The International Critical Commentary*, and *Word Biblical Commentary*.

The reversed order matches the order of the earlier proclamation of pardon first to Israel in line 4 and then to other nations in line 5. So here in line 6 first Jacob references Israel and then Abraham references other nations. But why? Why should Abraham link to other nations?

Although both men are ancestors of Israel, Jacob's tie is closer than Abraham's. "Israel," after all, is Jacob's own name, given by YHWH (Gen. 35:10). Jacob is the father of the 12 sons who spawned Israel's 12 tribes. Abraham is Jacob's grandfather, true, but he is also the father of Ishmael. Ishmael, like Jacob, also had 12 sons. These also settled in Canaan and their offspring eventually became "other nations" to Israel (Gen. 25:13). If it is appropriate to equate father Jacob with the nation of Israel, it is just as appropriate to equate father Abraham with the other nations.

Lines 6 and 7 reference the promises YHWH made long ago to Abraham and Jacob concerning Israel and her surrounding nations. YHWH promised Abraham he would preserve Ishmael's offspring as well as Isaac's (Gen. 21:13). He promised that through Abraham all the nations on earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3, 18). This promise was repeated to Isaac (26:4) and Jacob (28:14). YHWH's blessing toward Israel is inseparably bound with a blessing for other nations. In Micah 7:18–20, Israel's representative trusts in these promises and celebrates their fulfillment. This pericope does *not* contain "a gloss specifying and limiting the application of YHWH's forgiving spirit to Israel," as *The International Critical Commentary* asserts.¹⁹ Rather, by appealing to promises made to their common ancestor, it envisions a time when all nations through YHWH's pardon will be restored to harmony with each other and their God.

19. John Merlin Powis Smith, "Micah," 155.

Conclusion

Micah is an ancient text that admittedly contains portions difficult to translate and interpret. By examining two key words in Micah 7:18–20, “their” and “Abraham,” this paper demonstrates that the conclusion of Micah does not celebrate a restoration of Israel that leaves other nations out in the cold. Rather, it affirms that God’s mercy and compassion extend to all Abraham’s offspring – not just Isaac, but Ishmael, too. Whether we identify with Israel or her neighbors, we can all celebrate this inclusive vision of restoration.

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