

Reflections on the Book of Micah

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© Shutterstock: Amanda Carden, An empty manger inside a cave under the star of Bethlehem

Overview of Micah

Micah was a Judean prophet from Moresheth, a town about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. He was a contemporary of prophet Isaiah in the days of kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah.

The book consists of three prophetic addresses which are clearly distinguished from one another in form by similarity of introduction (all three commencing with “Hear,” chapters 1:2; 3:1; 6:1) and substantially by their contents.

Micah predicted the fall of Samaria as well as the destruction of Jerusalem in his introductory message to the people of Judah. He charged both Israel and Judah with breaking the covenant with God and he displayed his grief by laying aside his robe and walking barefoot and warning the people to prepare for exile (1:8-16).

Micah was against all kinds of evil practised by social and religious leaders, who oppressed and wronged the people. He bitterly denounced the rulers and princes who hate good and love evil, exploiting the people by perverting justice and true judgement.

Micah was severe in his condemnation of the false prophets who led the people astray and prophesied for money and profit. He also rebuked the dishonest merchants who enriched themselves by “wicked balances” and “deceitful weights”. What is clear is that “spiritual idolatry” and the breaking of the covenant with God led to severe moral breakdown of human relationships among the people, from the leaders, political and spiritual, to the common people in daily interactions and commercial enterprise. Micah boiled down his ideal of true religion in the words, “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). This applies specifically to us and to all who claim today to be God’s people.

It is interesting to notice how Micah changed the mood from gloom to hope in portraying the future glory of Zion and this perspective of hope extended beyond the mere restoration from captivity to the establishment of the messianic kingdom. From Zion righteous judgement will extend to all nations and universal peace will be established. From the promise of a triumphant future for the “remnant” (2:12-13; 4:1-8), Micah turned to the “present realities” of the state of the nations of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Their doom is certain but the Lord will redeem them. The remnant who repented and trusted the Lord will be transformed from an insignificant group to one that will dominate the world, not through military might but through the remnant’s purification and dedication in spiritual renewal. In this light, Micah had a vision of a better day, a day of universal peace and goodwill to men. He saw the coming of the “little town of Bethlehem” a ruler of Israel who would be a special prophet, priest and King (5:2).

The uniqueness of the book of Micah lies in its (not necessarily chronological) arrangement, which alternates between oracles of judgement and of future hope which are marked off by the call to “Hear” (1:2; 3:1; 6:1). Hope for the future is Micah’s last word; it begins with an expression of Israel’s returning from exile and now fulfilling her role for the nations and concludes with Micah’s prayer and God’s response (7:14-20).

Micah Chapter 1

Micah began with a vivid portrayal of the Lord coming in power to judge the nations (1:2-4). He then included the northern kingdom and its capital, Samaria, within the scope of this judgement. He subsequently caught the listeners from Judah, the southern kingdom, off-guard, by pointing out that Judah and Jerusalem would not escape divine punishment. Both cities had become centres of false religion, Samaria because of its Baal temple and Jerusalem because of its pagan high places.

Samaria would be reduced to a heap of ruins; her idols would be crushed to bits and burned. Micah bitterly lamented Samaria's demise and he realised that the destruction of Samaria also signalled the impending disaster for Judah. His lament is characterised by irony and wordplay involving the names of these cities.

Micah told the nobles of Israel to shave their heads as a sign of lamentation and sorrow; Micah himself went about barefoot and naked, giving a picture of future prisoners who would be taken into captivity following the coming Assyrian invasion. Walking barefoot and naked (wearing just a loincloth) also gave a picture of mourning in Micah's culture.

The people of God had broken the covenant with God and they had resorted to false worship and indulged in dishonesty and covetousness in their relationship. They exploited the poor and sought dishonest gains in their pursuit of wealth and selfish desires; at the same time they portrayed an external superficial religious demeanour. Judgement was therefore inevitable. This is a grim reminder for us today as God's people in a new covenant. Adopted as children of God, we ought to manifest the characteristics of our heavenly father in our worship of Him and in our relationships with others. Judgement begins in the house of God and we must not take our calling lightly and frivolously.

Micah Chapter 2

Micah pronounced impending judgement on the rich barons who planned evil on their beds and do it the next day because they were backed up by legal and financial power. They coveted fields, lands and homes of the poor and defrauded the latter of their inheritance. They blatantly broke the principles of covenant life (Leviticus 19) and denied the Lord's ownership of the land; they ignored the covenantal brotherhood and rejected the ten commandments, specifically the command not to covet what belonged to their neighbour.

The Lord pronounced disaster on them; they stole the fields of others but their fields will be stolen from them. Here again, there is wordplay and irony; the words translated "evil" and "disaster" in verse 3 are virtually identical in Hebrew. The words "save" and "takes" translate the same Hebrew "remove". The sinners would not be able to "remove" themselves from the Lord's judgement, but their enemies would be able to "remove" them from their property.

Micah then turned his attention to the false prophets and the people. They believed they were immune to punishment and that God would not do what He threatened through prophets like Micah.

The people practised social injustice against the vulnerable, including even children and women; they continued to have a sense of false security. We note the danger of presumption. They rejected God's true prophets and their warnings; instead the people listened to false prophets who promised their blessings and who in fact prophesied for money and profit. The land was contaminated by evil and would no longer be a resting place. It was destined for destruction.

The ten commandments and God's laws reflect the values of the Lord God and they are meant to lead His people to live a life that is best for them, giving them moral and spiritual direction. They are a love gift from God to His people, both those in the Old Testament and those in the new covenant in the New Testament. We have a problem keeping the Ten Commandments because man is born in bondage to sin and selfishness. We cannot help but break God's holy law. Jesus came to do what we ourselves could not do. As our human representative, Jesus fulfilled the law of God by perfectly obeying God's commands and by paying the penalty of death that

all lawbreakers owe. When we are born again, God gives a new heart (Jeremiah 31) and He gives us the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God who empowers us to obey God's commands. The good news is that under the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus, God's people are empowered to obey God's law. Although we are not yet perfected, we can move increasingly towards keeping God's laws more consistently. When we fail, there is the avenue of forgiveness in Christ when we repent (1 John 1:9).

We see how disaster comes about when God's people rebel and forsake the Lord's commands and laws, leading to broken and negative relationships horizontally. Micah pinpointed this to the people in Judah and pronounced evil and disaster on them. Loving God rightly and keeping His commands, not because of fear, but because of love and gratefulness, will cause us to love our neighbours sincerely. God's love spills over in our lives to touch and love our neighbours.

From verses 12 to 13, the Lord suddenly looked ahead to a day beyond the judgement when He would restore the exiled people. Though the coming judgement would reduce the nation to a remnant, the Lord, like a shepherd, would lead them out of their captor's city and bring them to His own fold, viewed as a second exodus. Here is an example of how Micah moved from the oracle of judgement to the oracle of hope suddenly. He would return to judgement from Chapter 3. God's judgement on His people seeks to lead them to repentance because of His love for them.

Micah Chapter 3

Micah accused the rulers of gross social injustice; their exploitation of the poor and perversion of justice was likened to “cannibalism”, so great was the social oppression and injustice. They resorted to theft of property, rejection of legal rights of the poor and even violence and acceptance of bribes in exchange for favour from the rich.

Their evil deeds against the helpless would result in their own helplessness in the day of judgment from the Lord God. Here is a sober reminder to those given leadership responsibilities. God expects such ones to uphold justice, to practise fairness, to avoid wrongful favouritism and to promote righteousness and truth, knowing that there is one above them, God Himself, to whom they would have to give an account.

Micah then turned his attention to the false prophets. They misled the people through greed; they ‘blessed’ those who gave them food and benefit, whilst those who did not were given a message of calamity. These prophets misused their office and role and were guilty of distorting God’s Word and message to the people. Micah warned them that they would be deprived of their abilities and access to God and they would cease to function as a spokesman for God and end up in shame and despair.

In contrast, the true prophet like Micah would fulfil his ministry with power, courage, honesty, and his message would be energised by God’s Spirit; he would uphold justice and expose wrongdoing. We are reminded in Scriptures that to those who are given much, much would be required; judgement would be more severe on those who are called to speak and teach on behalf of God. Misusing this role and responsibility would incur severe judgement from the Lord! There is no place for distorting the truth and teaching of the Lord for personal gain and benefit.

In the closing judgement speech in chapter three, Micah again addressed the nation’s rulers, the prophets and the priests. He warned them of the seriousness of social injustice, greed, unjust violence, the taking of bribes and the motivation for profit, even in the teaching of the Law to God’s people.

Despite these evil deeds and the breaking of God’s covenant, these leaders had the audacity to claim protection from the Lord and the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem. They were falsely confident that Jerusalem will not fall. Their presumption was unfounded. God would see to it that Jerusalem would suffer a similar fate as Samaria; the city would be uprooted, overturned and destroyed and the temple mount would become a habitation for wild beasts.

The prophecy was temporarily postponed because of the repentance and faithfulness of king Hezekiah but it was eventually fulfilled when Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians and the temple burned.

God's people cannot afford to take God's grace for granted and be presumptuous. God's mercy, grace and love are extended to us to cause us to repent and to walk in the light. A persistence in walking in darkness and grieving the Spirit of God would only mean testing the goodness of God and inviting judgement and discipline from Him. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

Micah Chapter 4

The tone of Micah's message suddenly shifts from judgement to salvation: verses 1-4 picture the elevation of Zion/Jerusalem and the submission of the nations to the sovereign rule of the Lord. It will be a time of peace and prosperity for Israel, with the major city, Jerusalem, serving as the centre of the Lord's worldwide rule. The language used indicates prestige and honour for Zion/Jerusalem.

Nations which had been hostile to Jerusalem would stream towards the city to receive instructions from the Lord in order to live according to God's principles for human society. Micah pictured the Lord as a universal king whose laws and decrees are binding upon all people.

With the Lord in control, the nations would no longer go to war to settle differences; there would be universal peace and disarmament. There would be peace, prosperity and security.

In verses 6-7, the Lord announced salvation for the remnant of Judah. Although God had caused them grief, He would personally intervene on behalf of His people. He would regather the exiles and make them into a remnant who would form the nucleus of the Lord's mighty restored nation. The Lord affirmed that the royal fortified city of David would have her former glory restored.

In verse 9, Micah returned to the current crisis facing Zion. Zion was in distress and panic because the exile of the city was imminent. The language pictures the loss of security, protection and the deportation of the people to a foreign country. Although the crisis would end in exile and humiliation, the Lord would not forget His people. Micah promised that the Lord would rescue His people and pictured the future deliverance of Jerusalem from enemy armies. He saw the present crisis as foreshadowing a final eschatological attack upon Jerusalem and God's deliverance of the city and the destruction of nations gathered against His people and city. The restoration of God's people would be accomplished.

Micah Chapter 5

In this chapter, Micah pointed to the restoration of God's people through the reestablishment of the Davidic throne to its former glory. Bethlehem Ephrathah is identified as the place or origin of this coming ruler. Two other places have the name Bethlehem; it is significant the Ephrathah was used to pinpoint the actual place where the ruler would come from. Micah 5:2 has its prophecy fulfilled in Matthew 2:5 where the place from which the Messiah would come was identified with reference to the prophecy of Micah.

Although Bethlehem was a small town among the clans of Judah, yet its significance comes from the very fact that it was an insignificant town. We see a pattern in God's working here; He uses the insignificant to carry out His plans. Jacob, the younger of the two sons of Rebekah, would become the more prominent of the two. Gideon, though the youngest in the smallest family in Manasseh, was used mightily by God, and the list goes on.

The mention of Bethlehem reminds us of king David; David himself was from this town and David was a shepherd. The future ruler and King would come from Bethlehem and He would shepherd His people and be their King. This great King would spring from the Davidic line and He would fulfill the ideals of the Davidic covenant: the Lord Jesus Christ, the perfect and ideal Son of David, would emerge as the new ruler in the future.

Micah pointed out that the sufferings of Zion would eventually come to an end; although God would send His people into exile, He would bring the exile to an end and the nation would return from exile and be reunited eventually.

The future Shepherd and King would be their peace. He would be a Shepherd who rules by the power of God. In the end times, Israel would be invulnerable to enemy attack and she would overcome them. The nations would be unable to combat the military power of Israel's remnant. The Lord would purify Judah and she would be purged of false religious practices. She would depend solely on the power of the Lord for deliverance and victory.

In contrast to the promised peace for His people, God promises wrath upon those who oppose Him. Referring to Assyria in a figurative sense to represent all hostile enemies, God describes a time when the tables will be turned and the enemies of His people will be destroyed.

Micah Chapter 6

The chapter opens with the Lord challenging the people to present their case in a “lawsuit” with the summons to the mountains to appear as witnesses. In the Old Testament context, God has called “heavens and earth” to be witnesses when a covenant between Him and the people was enacted, and here, in Micah 6, the mountains, which are permanent fixtures in the physical world, are poetically personified to be witnesses and to add to the solemnity in the proceedings. Something had gone wrong in the covenant between God and His people. Which party had been guilty of breaking the covenant?

The people of God, in disobedience, were acting as if God has mistreated them in some way. They were in fact accusing God of oppressing them and burdening them.

However, the historical reality shows clearly that they were obviously wrong: God had delivered them from bondage in Egypt in a miraculous way; He had given them leaders to guide them to the promised land and He had also protected them all the way in the wilderness and against enemies who sought to destroy them. Their accusations were certainly unfounded; God has been just and righteous in His dealings with His people. It is in fact the people who were unfaithful in their ways and they were constantly rebelling against God and the leaders God had appointed for them.

God then focused on His requirements: it was not rituals and sacrifices which God required; even thousands of animals sacrificed and burnt offerings will not be appropriate. God basically expected His people to meet certain ethical requirements: “to act justly, to love mercy (hesed) and to walk humbly with Him.” The people of God, despite their many religious activities and rituals, had failed miserably to uphold these ethical standards required by God. Hence their sacrifices, their so-called worship and the keeping of all the externalities amount to hypocrisy before God and were not acceptable.

The word “hesed” would sound familiar in our study of the book of Ruth; it speaks of loyal, faithful love although it is translated as mercy. God is much more concerned that His people are actively involved in bringing about justice than He is about the rituals of worship. Likewise, He wants His people to be zealous about faithful, loyal

love (hesed) both toward Him and toward other people. Walking in humility would mean recognising the glory and the power of God in contrast to our weakness and sinfulness – we are to walk with God in constant, daily relationship.

However, God's people had failed in these requirements. The Lord was fully aware of the socio-economic injustice going on in the city; merchants were cheating customers and dishonest business was rife. Their practices were so gross that they resembled the injustice and evil practised in the times of kings Omri and Ahab -these two kings were well known for their evil and rebellion against God.

So God intended to intervene and to judge; the judgement would be devastating and the people would become a reproach among the surrounding nations. They had blatantly violated the covenant with God and judgement would surely fall on them in line with the justice and holiness of the Almighty.

We see here the dangers of grumbling and murmuring against God and pointing the finger at Him when in fact, the reality has been God showering His grace, mercy and love on us as His people. We easily forget God's deliverance of us from the penalty and bondage of sin; we fail to realise His provision in giving us brethren, teachers and leaders to guide us and to lead us; we quickly overlook His protection and undertaking for us in so many ways. Instead, we are quick to complain when we see "things going wrong" in our lives and we blame God for all these. Oftentimes, such things happen because of our own wrong choices and desires; the Lord may allow them, in His love, to remind us of the need of total dependence on Him and He also uses such situations to mould us and make us more like His Son.

A grumbling spirit, a lack of gratitude, an attitude of blaming others – these may lead to a falling from grace and to God intervening in His love to bring us to our senses and to contriteness and repentance. Let us not harden our hearts when God speaks to us today.

Micah Chapter 7

The chapter begins with the prophet Micah's lamentation with regard to the impending judgement on the city of Jerusalem. Earlier on, we have seen Micah going about "naked", in his loin clothes, bare feet, lamenting for the people of God and the coming catastrophe that would strike the city.

Now, Micah, using the agriculture imagery, pictured himself walking through an orchard and finding no fruit to satisfy his appetite. He compared it to the absence of any faithful and upright man in Judah – no such man could be found in Judah!

Instead, violence, dishonesty and hostility permeated the whole society and among his countrymen. The people directed themselves to evil deeds "earnestly and efficiently"- we see here sarcasm coming through. The best of these sinners were like briars and thorns, using the agricultural imagery again. Such a society was doomed for destruction. It was a disintegrated society; relationships were no longer characterised by faithfulness and trust. Within the home children and servants rebelled against authority and one could no longer trust even those closest to oneself.

Here we are reminded of what Apostle wrote in 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

"But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days, People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people."

Indeed, such a society, in the days of Micah, was doomed for destruction; similarly, in the last days, judgement from God is imminent. Despite the corruption all around him and the impending judgement, Micah still expressed his trust in God and in His deliverance.

Micah's expression of trust in the Lord God sets the tone for the remaining of chapter 7 – Jerusalem personified and the whole nation look forward to God's intervention on their behalf following the judgement they have to go through.

Jerusalem rebukes her enemies for gloating over her humiliation. Though she is fallen, she is confident that God would intervene on her behalf and reverse her situation as well as that of her enemies. She would experience release from judgement into the light of salvation, whilst her enemies' pride would turn to shame.

God will redeem the situation for Abraham's sake. Micah conceives of a complete history from Abrahamic times to the end of time. God's promise to the patriarchs resulted first in exodus, conquest and David's dynasty; then came disintegration. After that will come a new exodus, new conquest, new David and new city of God (fulfilled by the Messiah, the Son of David and the new heaven and new earth).

Micah interprets history with both a short and a long term perspective. The book neglects neither the realities of the present nor the possibilities of the future.

Micah ended the book with praising God for His forgiveness, compassion and His faithful covenantal love (*hesed*). God will not stay angry for ever but will show mercy and grace, and He will deal with sin and put an end to it once and for all. The basis for this hope was God's faithfulness to Abraham and David, which assured that His mercy would replace His anger. This hope would be fulfilled by the coming ruler, the ideal king who would shepherd His people in the final eschatological exodus into the new heaven and the new earth.

By God's grace, we, the Church, become incorporated into God's people and share this same hope. Even though we live in a fallen world, with tribulation and persecution, we look forward with great anticipation to this glorious hope.

We end with this commentary by J.C. Ryle:

"Let us settle it then in our minds, for one thing, that the future happiness of those who are saved is eternal. However little we may understand it, it is something which will have no end; it will never cease, never grow old, never decay, never die. At God's 'right hand are pleasures for evermore' (Ps. 16:11). Once landed in paradise, the saints of God shall go out no more. The inheritance is 'incorruptible, undefiled, and fadeth not away.' They shall 'receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away' (1 Pet. 1:4,5:4). Their warfare is accomplished; their fight is over, their work is done. They shall hunger no more; neither thirst any more. They are travelling on towards an 'eternal weight of glory,' towards a home which shall never be broken up, a meeting without a parting, a family gathering without a separation, a day without night. Faith shall be swallowed up in sight, and hope in certainty. They shall see as they have been seen, and know as they have been known, and 'be for ever with the Lord.' I do not wonder that the Apostle Paul adds, 'Comfort one another with these words' (1 Thess. 4:17-18)."