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Introducing and Reading Micah¹

STUART LOVE

*Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. 2.1–2*

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? 6.8*

*But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. 3.8*

*Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height. 3.12*

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrath, . . .
From you shall come forth for me
One who is to rule in Israel, . . .
And he shall stand and feed his
Flock in the strength of the Lord,
In the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
and they shall live secure, for
now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace. 5.2, 4*

The above quotations set forth a noteworthy indictment of Judah's social sins (2.1–2), the quintessence of the Lord's expectations for right living based on Israel's ancient covenant obligations (6.8), insight into Micah as a prophet (first his feelings and grief over the Lord's destructive judgment of Samaria and Jerusalem, and second, his deep convictions about the authority and gifts he possessed

1. The author is grateful to Leafwood Publishers for granting permission to use materials from his previous publication: *Isaiah 1–12 & Micah, A Summons to Faith & Justice* (Streams of Mercy study series; Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2007), 17–28.

[3.8]), a prediction of the total devastation of Jerusalem and its temple (3.12), and portions of a hope poem concerning a new David who brings security and peace in a universal reign of God's people.

Our task in this article is to introduce Micah and to read this powerful collection of oracles in one setting.

INTRODUCING MICAH THE PROPHET

To introduce the prophet we will ask three questions: (1) Who was Micah? (2) When did he do his preaching? (3) What was the social and political backdrop of Micah's ministry?

Who was Micah? What do we know about him?

Micah's name means, "Who is like the Lord," which is not a question but an affirmation of the greatness of the God of Israel. The elements of his name, *mi* and *ca*, appear also at the end of the book, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?" (7.18).

Micah is a common name (see Judg 17.18) and should not be confused with an earlier prophet, Micaiah son of Imlah (1 Kgs 22). Micah was a younger contemporary of Isaiah, but unlike Isaiah of Jerusalem, Micah had rural roots. His home was located at Moresheth-gath (1.14), a peasant village, about twenty-five miles southwest of Jerusalem. His prophetic work was remembered over a century later in the time of Jeremiah (Mic 3.12; Jer 26.18–19). We know nothing more of him personally.

But we can know him better by examining something of his prophetic role. To do this, we must get beyond the facts to his message. Micah used in his preaching what is known as the Zion tradition, a belief that acknowledged God as the king of heaven and earth, Zion (Jerusalem) as God's city, his dwelling place, and the Davidic line of kings as God's anointed leaders in Jerusalem. However, Micah apparently did not believe that because the Lord had founded Jerusalem (Isa 14.32) and made it his dwelling (Isa 8.18), that he would ultimately save Zion. Instead, Micah proclaimed, "Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height" (3.12). Jerusalem and the temple itself therefore would be destroyed utterly because of the corruption of its leaders. Micah appealed to the heritage of early Israel—Moses, Sinai, and the exodus (6.3–5). From the vantage point of rural Judah, Micah interpreted theologically the events surrounding the fall of Samaria and the continued international instability caused by the aggressive imperialism of Assyria, the superpower of his day. He protested against the corruption of Jerusalem and its leaders and condemned worship practices disassociated from ethical performance (6.6–8). Like Isaiah, Micah believed in a revitalized future, a glorious and restored Zion to which the nations would come (chapters 4–5). He also hoped for a messianic king, a new David, not from Jerusalem but from Bethlehem (5.2–5).

Micah mourned over the incurable condition of Judah. He declared, "For this I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourn like the ostriches" (1.8). Micah's similes/metaphors manifested his person. He described corrupt leaders as cannibals who "tear the skin off my people and eat the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron" (3.2–3). Micah believed that Judah had an incurable wound (1.9). Without reservation or shame Micah identified with the oppressed poor against the power of political and religious leaders (1.9; 3.2–3) and prophets "who lead my people astray" (3.5). Filled with the power of God's spirit and with justice and might, Micah declared to "Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (3.8). Micah was God's rural prophet. His heart was revealed in his oracles.

When did Micah do his preaching? When did he prophesy?

Micah prophesied during the reigns of three kings of Judah during the eighth century B.C.E.: Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1.1). Perhaps we need to clear up some muddy water concerning these three Judea kings. *Jotham* (750–742 B.C.E.) became king at the age of twenty-five and ruled for sixteen years (2 Kgs 15.33; 2

Chr 27.1). Eventually, he had to contend with the emerging Syro-Ephraimite coalition (2 Kgs 15.37).² *Ahaz* (742–727 B.C.E.) was Judah’s king during the Syro-Ephraimite War. Facing the threat of Syria and Israel, Isaiah advised Ahaz to “take heed, be quiet, fear not” (7.4). Instead, Ahaz sought help from Assyria. As a consequence Judah became Assyria’s vassal. Finally, *Hezekiah* (ca. 715–687 B.C.E.) became king at the age of twenty-five and ruled twenty-nine years (2 Kgs 18.2; 2 Chr 29.1). Known for his religious reforms, Hezekiah trusted in the Lord during the continued Assyrian conquest. When Hezekiah became ill (ca. 702 B.C.E.), Isaiah told him he would die (38.1–22), but his life was spared after he prayed to God. During his rule forty-six fortified cities fell to the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. Micah was acquainted with some of these cities (1.8–16). Accordingly, most of Micah’s work took place during the final quarter of the eighth century because his sermons concern the fall of Samaria (1.6) and the campaign of Sennacherib (1.10–16).

What was the social and political backdrop of Micah’s ministry?

Two singular moments in Israel and Judah’s history inform the background to Micah. First, there was the Syro-Ephraimite War and its outcome. When Tiglath-pileser III became king of Assyria in 744 B.C.E., a relative period of peace came to an end in Israel and Judah. To resist Assyria, Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, attempted to enlist Ahaz, king of Judah, into an alliance against Assyria. When Ahaz refused to join the coalition, Pekah and Rezin attacked Judah and sought to replace Ahaz with a king more supportive of their objectives. This debacle is known as the Syro-Ephraimite War (734–732 B.C.E.). To resist this coalition, Ahaz sought the help of Assyria, a costly choice because Judah soon became a vassal state of Assyria (2 Kgs 16.5–9). When Damascus (Syria) fell to Assyria, Ahaz rendered homage to Tiglath-pileser and instituted idolatrous practices in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 16.5–9). Isaiah advised Ahaz not to turn to Assyria but to trust in the Lord. Ahaz did not heed Isaiah’s counsel and his reign is remembered as a time of apostasy (2 Kgs 16.1–4).

Second, there was the Assyrian invasion. Assyria successfully invaded Palestine and Samaria fell in 722–21 B.C.E. to Shalmaneser V/Sargon II. In 705 the Assyrian ruler, Sargon II, died. Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, believed this was the right time to rebel and sought support from Egypt (Isa 18–19; 30.1–7; 31.1–3). Egyptian help never materialized (Isa 36.6) and shortly thereafter, a new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, conquered the fortified cities surrounding Jerusalem in 701 (see Micah 1.8–16). The story of Sennacherib’s campaign against Jerusalem is found in Isaiah 36–39 (see 2 Kgs 18.17–19). However, despite Hezekiah’s offer of submission, Sennacherib continued his campaign (2 Kgs 18.13–37; see Isa 33.7–9). When Hezekiah stopped paying tribute (Isa 36.5) Sennacherib besieged the city (Isa 36.2–37.7; 2 Kgs 18.17–19). Hezekiah’s prayer for deliverance from Sennacherib (Isa 37.14–20) is one of the Bible’s most moving stories. Because Hezekiah trusted the Lord (unlike Ahaz before him), God promised Hezekiah that Sennacherib would not capture Jerusalem (Isa 37.33–35). The Assyrian army was destroyed and at a later time Sennacherib was assassinated (Isa 37.36–38).

CLEARING UP MUDDY WATER: ASSYRIAN RULERS

Tiglath-pileser	744–727 B.C.E.
Syro-Ephraimite War	734–732 B.C.E.
Shalmaneser V	726–722 B.C.E.
Siege of Samaria (2 Kgs 17.1–41; 18.1–12)	726–722 B.C.E.
Sargon II	721–705 B.C.E.
Led Samaria into exile	721 B.C.E.
Sennacherib	704–681 B.C.E.
Besieged Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18.13 - 19.37; Isa 36–37)	701 B.C.E.

2. The reader will learn more about this war shortly.

READING THE BOOK OF MICAH IN ONE SETTING

This may sound like a difficult task, but let me be your guide. You will need a Bible and a pen to write down a few notes along the way.

Let's begin by first identifying some major sections of Micah. This is a bit complicated because groups of oracles that might help us understand the book as a whole are not readily evident. Sometimes sayings are connected by a catchword like "now" as found in chapters 4 and 5 (4.9, 11; 5.1). Or, when we study the writing more carefully, we discover that certain themes link the little sermons together. As a result the sense of an arrangement or configuration is not readily apparent. Probably this is because the prophetic writings of the Old Testament are collections. Delbert R. Hillers translates a statement by Johannes Lindblom that I believe will be helpful to you.

We must stick to the viewpoint that the prophetic books of the Old Testament are *collections* and in principle abandon any claims to topical or chronological order or disposition among various units. The individual pieces are for the most part jointed on the basis of very superficial and purely accidental resemblances.³

First, let us view the book as a whole. Can we detect some organizational arrangement of the oracles? Micah is usually divided into either two (1.2—5.15 and 6.1—7.20) or three (1.2—3.12 and 4.1—5.15 and 6.1—7.20) major sections. If we follow the three-part approach, chapters 1–3 feature the Lord's judgment ("doom"), chapters 4 and 5 emphasize the theme of hope ("grace"), and chapters 6–7 combine the two themes (6.1—7.7, judgment, and 7.8–20, hope). Notice that with either of these two approaches there is a separation between chapters 5 and 6 and that chapter 6 begins with a summons to "hear" what the Lord says (6.1). So with your pen draw a line between 5.15 and 6.1.

Some, however, have noted as well the theme of hope in 2.12–13—a promise for the remnant of Israel. This raises the possibility that an arrangement of the oracles may follow an alternating pattern of oracles of judgment followed by oracles of salvation:

Judgment (1.1—2.11) followed by Salvation (2.12–13)
Judgment (3.1–12) followed by Salvation (4.1—5.15)
Judgment (6.1—7.7) followed by Salvation (7.8–20)

I would add to this approach that the summons to "hear" found in 6.1 is also found in 1.2 and 3.1. Let's approach our reading with this overall line of attack realizing that the big picture is difficult to ascertain. So, draw a line after 1.1. Then above verse 1.2 write something like "Section 1" and just beneath it write "Judgment," 1.2–11. Then, above verse 2.12, write "Salvation," 2.12–13. After verse 13 draw a line between chapters 2 and 3. You have marked off the first major section of judgment and salvation.

Now, above 3.1 write "Section 2" and just beneath it write "Judgment," 3.1–12. Then between 3.12 and 4.1 write "Salvation," 4.1—5.15. After verse 15 of chapter 5 draw a line between chapters 5 and 6. The second alternating "pattern" of judgment and salvation oracles has now been identified.

Finally, above verse 1 of chapter 6 write "Section 3" and just beneath it write "Judgment," 6.1—7.7. Then above verse 8 of chapter 7 write "Salvation," 7.8–20. Micah has now been divided into three sections based on the alternating themes of "judgment" and "salvation." We are now ready to read Micah in one setting.

3. Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 8. See note 35 for the reference to Lindblom.

First, read the heading (1.1).

This superscription, we believe, was added at a later time. Samaria and Jerusalem are capitals of the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah, respectively, which divided in 920 B.C.E. Micah's name means "Who is like the Lord"—an exclamation and not a question! The three kings, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah reigned in Judah during the eighth century B.C.E. What Micah "saw" concerning both kingdoms is important, but as we shall see his major concern was the southern kingdom of Judah. Emphasis is given to what Micah "saw" concerning both kingdoms. Prophecy in the OT often was characterized by "visions" (e.g., Isa 1.1, Ezek 1.1; Amos 1.1; Obad 1; Nah 1.1; Hab 1.1).

Second, read the first major section of judgment and hope (1.2—2.13).

Keep in mind that this entire segment is marked by judgment except for the final two verses in chapter 2. Chapter 1 is composed of two poems, the coming of the Lord in divine judgment (1.2–7) and a lamentation over the doom of the towns of Judah southwest of Jerusalem (1.8–16), a region well known to Micah since we believe his home was Moresheth-gath (1.14). The first oracle is a covenant lawsuit between the Lord and the people of Samaria, the northern kingdom. In this court trial, the Lord is the plaintiff, judge and executioner, the people are the defendants, and the mountains and valleys are witnesses against the people. Picture the Lord as making himself known to Israel in a theophany, but notice that in verses 8 and 9 Micah laments and wails, goes barefoot and naked, and compares his behavior to that of jackals and ostriches, creatures that dwelled in places of ruin and produced creepy howls and sounds. Notice the lament ends (1.16) with a description of mourning practices.

In the third message (2.1–11) Micah denounces social evils, specifically the wrongful seizure of family farms by those who had power and planned to do evil (2.2). (You might want to read the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21.1–29, a case study in the kind of behavior that Micah denounces.) Apparently, the land barons do not want Micah to preach against them. Then notice Micah's apparent sarcasm. What kind of preachers do his critics like to hear? They prefer false preachers, known more for their drinking and prevarications than their commitment to what is true. Our first section closes with an oracle of salvation (2.12–13) in which the Lord, portrayed as a shepherd-king, promises a restoration of "Jacob" drawing on themes of a new exodus.

Third, read the second major section of judgment and hope (3.1—5.15).

Judgment is announced against the political and religious leaders over their abuse of power in chapter 3. It is not a pretty picture. Cannibalism is used as a metaphor in verses 1–4 to describe the ruthless injustices perpetrated by Judah's leaders. Corrupt judges "eat the flesh," "flay the skin," "break the bones," and "chop" like meat the people's rights in legal settings. The prophets who preach for pay are then attacked (3.6–7) and contrasted to Micah's prophetic authority and mission (3.8). Micah's rivals are no more than crowd pleasers. A summary of what has been said about the corrupt leadership then follows and reaches a climactic prediction of the complete destruction of Jerusalem (3.9–12). Keep in mind that verse 12 was cited over a century later in the trial of Jeremiah (Jer 26.18).

Chapter 4 opens with a poem of universal peace that is basically identical to Isaiah 2.2–4 and beautifully portrays an ideal age when God's reign emanates from the "mountain of the Lord's house." In this poem Israel is victorious, the nations are judged, disarmament takes place, and land possession provides security for God's people. The oracle is quite different—actually a polar opposite—from what you just read in 3.12. Following the peace poem, chapters 4.6—5.15 present a series of oracles concerned with the themes of siege and survival (4.10—5.6 = siege; 5.7–15 = survival). A question to be asked is whether some of these speeches fit best the time of the sixth century and the time of the Babylonian captivity (4.10). Or, as some argue, do they point to an earlier date because they are based on the old Zion theology that dates from the tenth century? More to the point, we must ask what function does the hope oracle play in this book

of woe? The section 4.10—5.6 envisions siege, but 5.7–9 talks about surviving siege, although barely so. One possibility is that the writer uses an old Zion oracle in 4.1–5 but reconfigures it to talk about surviving calamity. (Micah poses some difficult interpretive challenges!)

Perhaps the best-known passage is 5.2–6, which is cited partially in Matthew 2.6. Note how a new David emerges, not from Jerusalem but from Bethlehem, David's birthplace, to rule in an ideal age. The chapter closes (5.7–15) with a description of the future role of the remnant that will include victory over other nations. Israel will achieve this victory, however, not by military force, sorcery or idolatrous worship, but by relying on the Lord.

Fourth, read the final section (6.1—7.20).

A lawsuit opens chapter 6. The first two verses constitute a summons and verses 3–5 describe the Lord's charge as plaintiff. Verses 6 and 7 are the defendant's plea set forth by a series of questions that are answered negatively in verse 8. Notice how verse 8 summarizes obligations of the Sinai covenant: do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God. This is true religion (think of James 1.27). An oracle of judgment (6.9–16) follows in which Jerusalem, the corrupt city, is cursed. Notice the social and economic content of the indictment—"wicked scales" and "dishonest weights" (6.11). Jerusalem, like wicked Samaria (6.16), must be destroyed. The curses invoked in 6.14–15 relate also to the Sinai covenant (see Deut 28.30–31). The final judgment oracle is a lamentation (7.1–7). Observe how Micah feels alone and abandoned as he searches for one good person. Verse 6 is familiar to us because Jesus uses it in the Gospels as a challenge to those who would follow him (see Matthew 10.35–36 and Luke 12.53).

Make sure that you read verse 7 out loud. Three times Micah mentions the Lord and affirms his faith in the Lord.

The writing closes with a psalm of hope (7.8–20) in which the people confess their sins believing that they will be saved. Some scholars affirm that this section is designed for worship. There are shifts in content and speakers. It begins with lament (8–10), then is followed by a word of encouragement (11–13), and closes asking the question (7.18), "Who is a God like you [a play on Micah's name noted in the heading] pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?" In the end the community affirms its faith in the Lord who loves and forgives his people.

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