

## MICAH

### Prophet of Divine Justice

**Historical context.** Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah (725-700B.C.), prophesied during the reign of three kings in Judah (Southern Kingdom): Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. He comes from Moresheth, a small rural town southwest of Jerusalem. His concerns are similar to those of Isaiah, Hosea and Amos, social justice and the coming Assyrian invasion. With burning eloquence, he attacks the rich exploiters of the poor, fraudulent merchants and judges, corrupt priests and prophets. Even though he lives in the south, he condemns abuses in both Samaria (capital of the Northern Kingdom) and Jerusalem. In his role as a prophet, he is like Jeremiah. He speaks out against prophets, who only say what the people want to hear and are not concerned about the well-being of the nation. Micah stands out as a lonely figure. Like Jeremiah, he is not successful in reaching the people, but trusts that God will vindicate him (7:1-10).

**Theme and division of chapters.** The Book of Micah bounces back and forth between threats and promises, doom and salvation. Micah threatens Israel and Judah with punishment and destruction if they do not repent of their sins of injustice. If they do repent, God will be merciful to them and will bless them. Micah sees the Assyrians as God's instrument punishing Israel for her sins. The book has two sets of threats and two sets of promises.

**Part 1:** Judgment of Israel and Judah (Chapters 1-3)

**Part 2:** Promises of salvation- A New Israel (Chapters 4-5)

**Part 3:** Threats (Chapters 6:1 to 7:7)

**Part 4:** Promises (Chapter 7:8 to 20)

#### COMMENTARY

##### **PART 1: THREATS OF DIVINE JUDGMENT (CHAPTERS 1:1 to 3:12)**

*"Hear, O peoples, all of you, give heed, O earth, and all that fills you. Let the Lord be a witness against you...."* (1:2)

*"...What is the crime of Jacob?... What is the sin of the house of Judah...?"* (1:5)

*"Woe to those who plan iniquity and work out evil on their couches...."* (2:1)

*"They covet fields and seize them...."* (2:2)

*"Hear, you leaders of Jacob, rulers of the house of Israel. Is it not your right to know what is right?"* (3:1)

In the opening verses of the book, God is introduced as judge (vv 3-4); there is a presentation of evidence (v.5) and a sentencing of a culprit (vv 6-7). In verses 8-9, Micah laments the destruction that will come to his own country Judah for imitating the sins of Samaria. *"I go barefoot and naked"* (v.8) is Micah anticipating the coming destruction.

**Verse 2:1-5.** Micah heaps condemnation on the wealthy landowners who steal the fields of the poor. But ruination is coming their way (v.4).

**Verse 2:6-13** is a confrontation between Micah and the false prophets who only preach what the wealthy landowners want to hear.

**Chapter 3.** The leaders are condemned for their failure to act justly. Instead, they chop to pieces those without power. The false prophets are also condemned (vv 5-7). Because of their sins and failures, *"Zion shall be plowed like a field and Jerusalem reduced to rubble"* (3:12).

**Pause:** What are the forms of injustice prevalent in our society today?

##### **PART 2: PROMISES OF SALVATION; GATHERING THE POOR AND OUTCASTS (CHAPTERS 4-5)**

*"In the days to come, the Lord's house shall be established.... Many people shall stream to it. Many nations shall come and say, 'Come, let us climb the mountain of the Lord...that he may instruct us in his ways....'"* (4:1-2)

*"...They shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks...."* (4:3)

*"'On that day', says the Lord, 'I will gather the lame, and I will assemble the outcasts and those whom I have afflicted.'"* (4:6-7)

*“But you Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me One who is to be the ruler of Israel....”* (5:1)

In chapters 4-5, the violent language of chapters 1-3 is replaced by a promise of a much brighter future for Judah as we can see from the verses quoted above.

**4:1-3.** In these beautiful verses (which are identical to Is 2:2-4) all nations are envisioned as coming to Jerusalem where they will receive instruction concerning God and his ways. The text also envisions a world free of war.

In chapter 5, Micah shifts his attention from the big city of Jerusalem, a place of corruption, to the small God-fearing town of Bethlehem where a future king will come from.

In our Christian liturgies, we read 5:1-3 because it is seen as a reference to the coming Messiah.

### **PART 3: NEW THREATS (CHAPTERS 6:1to7:7)**

*“O my people, what have I done to you, or how have I wearied you? Answer me!”* (6:3)

*“You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.”* (6:8)

*“You whose rich men are full of violence, whose inhabitants are full of falsehood.”* (6:12)

*“...The judge is bought for a price....”* (7:3)

*“But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will put my trust in God my savior; my God will hear me.”* (7:7)

**6:1-8—Israel on trial.** These verses follow the sequence of a legal procedure. The opening line reminds us of a courtroom, *“Arise, plead your case”* Israel is on trial. God is her accuser and judge. The actual charge is implied rather than explicitly stated: Israel has grown tired of God and chosen to go her own way. God wonders what is up and asks: *“O my people, what have I done to you, or how have I wearied you? Answer me!”* (These are words we hear during Holy Week or when praying the Stations of the Cross).

Then the defendant Israel addresses the court. She wonders what she can do to set things right. It seems

that the response called for is some ritual activity. *“Shall I come before him with holocausts? Will the Lord’s anger be appeased if we offer a thousand rams? If that is not enough, perhaps we can offer our first born for our crime”* (vv 6-7). The nation is so out of touch with the essence of true religion that it thinks that true faith can be replaced with ritual.

Then God responds: *“You have been told, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you”* (v.8). Three things:

- *Do right:* To do right means to do what is just. No amount of temple ritual can fill the vacuum of justice. While injustice rules in Israel, temple worship is useless in God’s eyes.
- *Love goodness.* Goodness goes beyond justice. It goes the extra mile and gives when no giving is required.
- *Walk humbly with your God.* The daily walk in relationship with God lies at the heart of all true religion.

The above triad of virtue forms the foundation of religion and is one of the best known texts in the Bible and is sometimes called: “The Prayer of Micah”.

### **6:9-16—Crimes of unjust commerce condemned.**

On market day when the country folk come into town to buy and sell, they are cheated by the wealthy. In verses 13-16, unjust dealings are roundly condemned or there will be consequences. The seed of the harvest will be grown but no harvest will be reaped. Food acquired by illegal means will not satisfy. In short, the marketplace has become a place of injustice.

**7:1-7.** The first six verses describe a society where corruption and lawlessness are prevalent. The only solution, according to Micah, is repentance and renewed reliance upon the Lord. *“As for me, I will look to the Lord, I will put my trust in God my savior; my God will hear me”* (v.7).

**Pause:1)**What can help us to be honest in a society where cutting corners is the order of the day?

2) If asked what is the essence of true religion, how many people today would say: act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly before the Lord?

## CHAPTER 7:8-20: Concluding Psalm

*“Rejoice not over me, O my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise....”* (7:8)

*“Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance....”* (7:14)

*“Who is there like the God who removes guilt and pardons sin for the remnant of his inheritance...?”*(7:18)

This psalm can be divided into four parts:

- **Verses 8-10.** A humiliated personified Jerusalem speaks to her enemy saying she will rise again.
- **Verses 11-15.** The speaker, perhaps during a liturgy, declares that it is time for new action: the collapsed walls of the city are to be rebuilt.
- **Verses 16-17.** A declaration about the destruction of other nations.
- **Verses 18-20.** Micah ends with a beautiful statement about God’s mercy. *“Who is there like you, the God who removes guilt and pardons sin...?”*(v.18)

**Pause:** What gives you hope when darkness invades your life?

### Concluding word

In concluding his commentary on Micah, Peter Craigie writes:

*The prophets spoke first and foremost to their own people in their own time, but their words were preserved because someone had the wisdom to see that their relevance was not confined to the current generation. Micah’s words are no less relevant to the 20<sup>th</sup> century A.D. than to the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the time of their delivery, or the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the time of the postscript. For every generation needs to know of the importance of justice and the centrality of loving-kindness; every age needs to have its social conscience pricked by Micah’s penetrating words. And thus, as we read the ancient Scriptures and seek to apply them to our own lives and our contemporary*

*world, we are standing firmly in the tradition of those who left us the postscript to Micah’s book.*(Daily Study Bible Series, Twelve Prophets p.57)

### Resources

- The Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Daily Study Bible Series –Twelve Prophets 2