

An Isagogical Study of the Book of Micah

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[Delivered at the Gadsden Delegate Conference of the Arizona-California District, February 5/6, 1979]

The Author

The entire prophecy is the work of one man, Micah. The name is an abbreviated form of "Micaiah" – "Who is like unto the Lord?" He is one of the twelve persons in the Old Testament to bear this name. I Kings 22:8f mentions another prophet Micah (Micaiah), the son of Imlah, from whom our prophet is distinguished by being called "the Morashtite," being a native of Moresheth, near Gath of Judah. It was a small, insignificant village about seven miles north-east of Gath, one of the chief cities of ancient Philistia. This would place it about twenty miles west of Jerusalem. The personality of the author of this book, like those of most of the minor prophets, is hidden in obscurity. Since his father's name is not given, it is assumed that his family was of humble origin. It is significant that his preaching ministry was especially preoccupied with the sufferings of the common people and of the peasants in the agricultural areas who were exploited by the rich and unscrupulous nobility. Micah seems to have spent much of his lifetime in the provincial areas, or rural communities of Judah, rather than at the capital city of Jerusalem, where his great contemporary, Isaiah, did his prophesying. For this reason he was not in as close touch with international politics as was Isaiah.

The Date

The time in which his prophetic ministry falls is given as "the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah," or between 740 and 700 B.C. He would, therefore, have been a contemporary of Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. This corresponds also with the message of the book. Chapter six speaks of the coming destruction of Samaria which occurred in the year 722 B.C. The conditions of corruption and immorality in Judah as Micah depicts them correspond well with what is known of the reign of Ahaz and the earliest years of Hezekiah's reign prior to his reforms. But Micah's career must have begun even earlier than the reign of Ahaz, for 1:1 speaks of his prophesying in the reign of Jotham. As to the question of when his preaching ministry ceased, there is no certain evidence. From Jeremiah 26:18, 19 we learn that his earnest warnings during the reign of Hezekiah were taken seriously, and made an important contribution to the revival which took place at that time.

The Setting

At the time of Micah, a generation had grown up which did not know the bitterness of oppression by an enemy. In fact, they had little experience with actual warfare. Peace and prosperity had returned to the land. Agriculture had revived and the harvests were rich. Commerce flourished and the people began to flock to the cities. The people once again found themselves wealthy. Under such conditions the building trade also flourished. The people, because of their wealth, were now able to afford the luxuries of life. Homes became palaces and country residences were the order of the day.

However, as is always the case, side by side with this great wealth was poverty, need, and want. So great was the poverty that people were being sold as slaves in order to pay back what they had borrowed to provide for the necessities of life. The wealth of the rich, moreover, was not amassed by fair means. The merchants loved to oppress and deceive their competitors in an effort to force them out of business. By clever manipulation the scales were changed to enable them to overcharge for their wares. The rich had no pity on the poor and would think nothing of "stealing" from them their last shekel. They took advantage of their poverty to rob them of what little they happened to still possess and bought and sold them like cattle in the market place.

The courts and magistrates were no better. There was no law or justice in the land, because the judges would rule in favor of those who were able to fatten their pocketbooks the most. To go to court would have

been hopeless and useless. It was easier to suffer in silence than to look for justice, for in the courtroom they would lose the last of their possessions and be condemned as a criminal.

The religious conditions were just as appalling as the political and social conditions were. The "high places" still remained. Unbelief was running rampant, and idolatry was practiced along with the worship of Jehovah. The worship of Baal was made the official religion of Israel by Ahab and Jezebel. Of course, the name Jehovah was inserted for Baal, but the worship practices remained basically the same. Divination was commonplace. Soothsayers and wizards were in great demand, which meant that superstition and witchcraft flourished. Swearing, lying, stealing, adultery, and killing were the natural result of a nation which had turned its back on its God.

Also, at this time, it should be remembered that Assyria was developing as a world-power.

The Purpose

The purpose of the book is to set forth the nature of God's complaint against His people, to announce the certain punishment that would result because of their sin, but also to announce the sure salvation to come, which shall center in the appearance of the Messiah.

In the early part of this period, the Northern Kingdom was still standing, but the signs of its downfall were in clear view, and Micah joined with Hosea and Amos in denouncing its sins. His mission was not to the Northern Kingdom alone, but also to the Southern, and he views the capital cities of Jerusalem and Samaria as epitomizing the sins of their respective countries.

Unlike Hosea and Amos, who had much to say about the idolatry and immorality which was the result of the pagan influence around them, Micah confined his prophecy to the problems arising from the social injustices enacted on the small landowners, farmers, and peasants. He uttered stern warnings to those who wrongfully deprived others of their possessions, pointing out that God was devising a suitable punishment for them. He utters scathing denunciations against the ruling classes and against the false prophets. Like Isaiah, he was a mighty preacher who did not mince any words in pointing out the sinfulness of the people. But Micah was not a social reformer who would triumph the cause of the downtrodden in an effort to make Israel and Judah a better place in which to live. Like Isaiah, once more, his purpose was to bring the people to repentance and faith so that they would share in the eventual salvation of God's true people by the coming of the Messiah, whom he foretells, even pinpointing the place of His birth in 5:2.

The book of Micah was undoubtedly written by the prophet at the end of his ministry in the time of Hezekiah. It is a condensation of the prophecies made during his lifetime. Needless to say, it was all done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Outline and Message

I. The Sentence of God Upon Both Idolatrous Kingdoms, 1:1-16

A. God to crush Israel's pride because of broken law, 1:1-4

The prophet Micah begins by calling all the earth, not just Samaria and Jerusalem, to testify to the wickedness of Israel and Judah and to witness the punishment because of it. There they are to witness God's unchanging holiness, His insistence on the fulfillment of His laws, His judgments against all transgressors, and at the same time they will see His grace, mercy, and longsuffering in His dealings with His own chosen people. He is pictured as a victorious conqueror on the march. No place will be safe from Him. Like wax spreading in all directions, so will the devastation spread. The mountains and the valleys will lose their characteristics. The pouring down of water from a steep place is also symbolic of disaster.

B. Punishment for idolatry: destruction of Samaria, 1:5-7

The prophet now lists the reason for the destruction. The whole nation, both Northern and Southern Kingdoms, had revolted against the Lord, and the capital cities of Jerusalem and Samaria were the worst. Therefore, Samaria, considered to be an unconquerable fortress, will be so overrun that its steep ascents will be used for vineyards instead of protection. The images which had been worshiped will be broken and burned, and those spared would be carried away to heathen shrines. The prophet uses the picture of adultery when speaking of their idolatry, for that is just what idolatry is—failing to remain faithful to God.

C. Lament over the coming (Assyrian) invasion: its progress city by city, 1:8-16

The judgment will not stop at Samaria, however, but spread over Judah. The prophet depicts this by saying he will go about mourning as a prisoner, to set forth the misery that will come upon Judah also. It has to, because she is past the point of no return. To confirm this, he announces to a series of cities the fate awaiting them and the entire kingdom, by a continued play upon words founded upon their names. People from the town of Beth-le-aphrah (house of dust) would roll in dust as a symbol of sorrow and shame. Those in Shaphir (beauty) would pass naked into captivity. People in Zaanan (going forth) would not be able to go forth or escape. The town of Beth-ezel (near house or near place) would no longer be available as a town of rest because of the wailing in it. People in Maroth (bitterness) would experience no good.

Because the people of Lachish had been responsible for introducing the sins of Israel into Judah, it would have to give up its town of Moresheth-gath to an enemy. Achzib (false town) would prove true to its name by deceiving its king. Mareshah (summit or chief place) would be conquered, and the glory of Israel, that is, the rich and the proud, the aristocracy, would go down in humility to Adullem, the place where David sought refuge in one of the caves. Because of this captivity (Israel in 722 B.C. and Judah in 586 B.C.) the people are to shave their heads as a sign of deep mourning.

II. Bill of Particulars: Oppression by the Upper Classes, 2:1-3:12

A. Exploitation of defenseless by idle rich, 2:1-13

Micah now pronounces woes upon the rich for defrauding the poor. Day and night their ceaseless activity was to obtain whatever they coveted. And no one could resist their reign of terror because it was done under the cover of laws. (We have an example of this in the account of Ahab and Naboth.) Because of this, the Lord would place a yoke of captivity about their necks, the same necks they now hold high in haughty defiance of the laws of God and men. Mocking jingles would be spoken against them, but instead of crying out for forgiveness, they only weep for their losses. Forgetting their own apostasy, they can't understand why God should punish His people so severely. Because of their lack of repentance, they will be excluded from the congregation of the saints.

This prophecy, however, met with violent opposition. The ungodly tell the prophets of God to dry up, for they are always harping on the same string. "Are you really descendants of Jacob?" Micah asks. "If so, then why don't you listen to my words?" Instead, the rulers, figuratively speaking, pull the clothes right off the backs of their unsuspecting countrymen, either by theft or by forcing them to pawn their best clothes to make payments due on interest or capital. Women are evicted from their homes, and children are deprived of the material blessings which God has given them. They are, therefore, told to leave the Promised Land. No longer do they enjoy God's peace, protection, and

prosperity. While they did not like the preaching of Micah, they would gladly listen to anyone who would preach about good times and happy days. They preferred lies to the truth.

But the Lord would not reject them entirely. He will assemble the remnant, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, true spiritual Israel. They will be well-fed and provided for, and as a result, they shall make a great noise with their prayers, praises, and preaching. For the Lord will break down the gates of their prison, which is Satan's stronghold of sin, death, and damnation. He will breach the gates of hell, and an endless stream of people will go out into freedom. Even then, the Lord will continue leading them by means of the Word and sacraments.

B. The government a devourer instead of a defense, 3:1-4

Micah, first of all, addresses the princes and rulers whose business was to know the law. Instead of following the law, however, they hated what was good and pleasing to God and of benefit to the community. Figuratively speaking, they tore people's skin and broke their bones by means of ruthless, oppressive actions. Their sole aim was to satisfy the desires of the flesh, to obtain and enjoy riches, luxury, and power. Since they showed no mercy, the Lord would show no mercy to them.

C. Contrast between the corrupt state religion and the power and the message of God-fearing preachers, 3:5-8

This section is directed against the false prophets. Their chief concern was to wine and dine, to feast on rich food. They preached to the itching ears of the people and prophesied of peace and prosperity, for that is what the people wanted to hear. They, furthermore, declared war on the true prophets of God who dared to stand against them. But the day would come in which they themselves would have to endure darkness and shame. They will be exposed for what they really are here in time and also in eternity. Micah, on the other hand, a truly God-sent and God-inspired prophet, was faithful in his calling of denouncing the sins of the people.

D. The utter destruction to be meted out to these three evil groups, 3:9-12

The rulers detested justice, built the economy with blood, and accepted bribes. The priests and prophets labored primarily for their own enrichment, yet they were confident that the Lord would never carry out His judgment, for they had deluded themselves into thinking that they were still God's people and were serving Him. Therefore, Jerusalem would become a heap of ruins and a plowed field.

III. The Ultimate Triumph of God's Grace, 4:1-5:15

A. Messianic triumph of the kingdom of God over the world, 4:1-8

In "the last days," the New Testament era, God's kingdom of grace will be the chief of all kingdoms. It will tower over the mountains in splendor, and a stream of people will flow into it from the uttermost parts of the earth. There will be world-wide mission work, and new territories will be conquered by the gospel. His Word will be the norm of life for Christians throughout the world. They will make God's will their will, take it home with them, and walk according to it. The Lord will defend and protect His Church so that nothing will destroy it. The Church will experience true peace and rest knowing that their sins are forgiven and that the Lord is in control of all things. It is this peace of God that keeps the Christian from cares and worries. Even while this is taking place, others

will be walking in unbelief, trusting in their own gods, whatever they may be. But it is the true Church of Christ that will become a strong nation and endure. Obviously, the prophet is here speaking of a spiritual kingdom, not a physical one.

- B. Necessary conditions to be first fulfilled: suffering, exile, restoration, judgment upon heathen neighbors, 4:9-23

Before the Messiah would arrive, however, Judah would have to endure a humiliating captivity in Babylon. The nation would lament the loss of her king because he was the representative of God's grace, and his removal was a sign of God's wrath. But eventually the nation would be redeemed and restored. This took place under Cyrus. Other nations, too, would rise up against her and mock her, but they would be overthrown by the Lord. True Israel, proclaiming the Law and the Gospel, will see the unbelievers swept away like chaff and the grain, the true believers, will be gathered into God's granaries. Truly a day of glory lies ahead of her.

- C. The divine-human Victor who shall bring this to pass, defending His flock, destroying the world powers, 5:1-6

The previous prophecy ended on a joyous note, yet the day of victory still lay in the distant future. Israel is told to huddle together in fear and distress. She will be harassed and deprived of her liberty. Even her rulers would be insulted and mistreated. We see this very thing occurring under Antiochus Epiphanes, Herod the Great, and Rome. But for true Israel the day of deliverance would come. It would initiate from little, insignificant Bethlehem. There the Messiah, the eternal Son of God, would be born.

Bethlehem always remained a little, insignificant town even though Rachel and Benjamin were buried there, Ruth gleaned there, and David was born there. The name, "Ephratah," means "the fertile ones" or "fertile plains." This was the old name for Bethlehem, "house of bread," (Genesis 35:19; I Samuel 17:2; Ruth 1:2). That this was understood as a Messianic prophecy in Jesus' day is seen in Matthew 2:1ff and John 7:42. One wonders why the chief priests and scribes believed the first part of the passage (born in Bethlehem), and not the second half ("Whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting") which clearly indicates that the Messiah would be the eternal God.

When the Messiah comes He will gather His spiritual nation together. He will be their Ruler and Shepherd. In Him His people would dwell securely, and His fame would be world-wide. In the Messiah there would be peace, for He is Peace personified. When the "Assyrians" of the future—all persons hostile to the Messiah and His people—would overrun the Lord's people, the Messiah would raise up men to save His people. They would be spiritual leaders and leaders among the people who would oppose the enemies of the Church, such as Paul, the apostles, Athanasius, Augustine, Wycliff, Luther, Tyndale, faithful preachers, and teachers, and Christian fathers and mothers. The Church will not only repulse the attacks of its enemies, it will attack the enemy and his territory and lay it waste. This will not be done with earthly, but spiritual weapons; namely, "the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God." The Church outwardly appears weak, but is spiritually strong, making new conquests every day.

- D. Triumph of Israel after humbling and purging from idolatry, 5:7-15

True Israel will be victorious, for "he that believeth not shall be damned." It will be superior to all nations without using weapons, horses, fortresses, counselors, and everything else which heathen nations put their trust in. It is God Himself who will protect His Church and execute vengeance.

IV. God's Controversy with Ungrateful Israel, 6:1-16

A. Summons to the Northern Kingdom to respond to God in view of His Exodus Mercies, 6:1-5

In a court trial held before the mountains the Lord argues His case against His people. What did He do to make them turn on Him? Was He too strict, were His requirements too rigorous? No, God had done nothing to merit their ingratitude. On the contrary, He had brought them out of the land of Egypt and into the Promised Land. He fought for Israel against Egypt and thwarted the plan of Balak, the Moabite king, to destroy Israel by means of the curses of the prophet Balaam. By destroying Israel's enemies, He showed His people how He feels about sin, yet they insisted on going their own separate way.

B. Response of an awakened conscience—holy living to accompany valid worship; yet, Israel still dishonest and oppressive, 6:6-13

Instead of worshiping God in spirit and in truth, Israel worshiped with ritual forms. They had little concern for justice, kindness, humility, and little fear of God. They went through the outward actions of worship, but their heart was not in it. Instead of bowing humbly before the throne of grace, they thought they could bargain with God. Without the fruits of faith listed in verse eight, moral virtues are only "glittering vices" in which God finds no pleasure.

Yet, even though the prophets of God were still proclaiming His message of repentance and faith, there was none to be found. Their sins (Israel's) included cheating, violence, and lying. Their punishment at the hands of God is, therefore, inevitable.

C. Failure to repent to be followed by a crop failure: the "clever" policy of alliance with unbelievers to be discredited, 6:14-16

The time would come when food would not satisfy, savings would not increase, and farming would be unproductive, for the enemy would be in the land and he would either take and use these things for himself or would destroy them. And why? Because Israel chose to follow the statutes of Omri, who was worse than all his predecessors. His statutes were Baal-worship, which his son and successor, Ahab, made the national religion. The shamefulness of their sins would be matched by the shame they would experience at the hands of the heathen nation.

V. Fulfillment of Covenant Promises to Faithful Remnant, 7:1-20

A. Lament of true Israel over prevalence of Barbarous selfishness and shameful corruption, 7:1-6

True Israel laments this sad condition. She is pictured as standing in a barren field. Godly men are as scarce as early figs after the grape harvest. Those who walk in the way of God's law cannot be found. Bloodshed and persecution are everywhere. Money-madness reigns. So wicked are the people that even the most upright is like a briar, a weed that snatches at all that pass by. Their boldness, however, will be changed to panic when the Lord executes His judgment. The closest and most sacred relationships will be broken down. One cannot even trust his own family, for quarrel, strife, and hatred will have disrupted family life.

B. True Israel's continued trust in God's mercy, 7:7-10

The Church does not lose faith and trust in God. Rather, she turns to the Lord because of these things. She is able to confidently face her enemies knowing that the Lord will change the night of sin, sorrow, and suffering into sunshine. She knows she deserves nothing but God's wrath because of her faults, failings, and flaws. Therefore, there will be no grumbling. The enemy, too, shall see that the Church's trust in the Lord is not in vain. Although the heathen nations were carrying out the will of God in their conquest, they grew proud in doing so. Consequently, the Lord will overthrow them.

C. Christ's triumph through the Church Age, 7:11-20

All nations shall flow into the Church. People from all continents and countries shall come, from Assyria to Egypt, from Africa to Asia. Although the earth would become desolate because of what its inhabitants would do, the Lord would shepherd His flock. The people of the nations would see what God does for His people, tremble over their own power, and crawl out of their places of refuge like creeping things out of the earth. In dread they would turn to God and fear Him.

The prophet ends his book with a hymn of praise in honor of God's grace and mercy, for He richly and daily forgives all sins to me and all believers. He will trample down our guilt which disturbs our conscience and give us true peace of mind. When our sin cries out to the Lord, He takes it and hurls it to the ground and stomps on it. It is wiped forever from His memory. So the Lord shows that He remains faithful to the promises He made to Abraham and the forefathers. He remains true in all that He says and does.

Conclusion

At the close of his exposition of Micah, Luther quotes Jerome's prayer with which the latter ends his commentary on this prophet. After examining the Book of Micah, we can well understand why Luther does this. In light of the preceding chapters, we will also want to make this prayer our prayer.

"O God, who is a God like unto Thee? Who pardonest iniquity, passest by the transgression of the remnant of Thy people; who retainest not Thine anger forever because Thou delightest in mercy; Thou hast turned to us again and hast had compassion upon us. Thou hast subdued our iniquities and hast cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Oh, preserve unto us this Thy mercy forever and ever, so that we may walk in the light of Thy Word and escape all dangers threatening us from Satan and the world, through Jesus Christ, Thy Son and our Redeemer. Amen. Amen. Amen."

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