

MICAH 2:1 - 3:12

MORE LAMENTATION

Unjust seizure of property

¹Woe to those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they performed it, because it is in their power.

²They coveted fields, and seized them; houses, and took them away; they oppressed householder and house, people and their inheritance.

³Therefore thus says YHWH: Now, I am devising against this tribe an evil from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time.

⁴On that day he shall take up a taunt song against you, and wail with bitter lamentation. He said, "We are utterly ruined. He has altered the inheritance of my people. How he has removed what is mine! Among our captors he parcels out our fields."

⁵Therefore you will have no one working out the boundaries by lot in the assembly of YHWH.

Here again we should remember that we are listening to the cadences of rhetorical utterance, not reading logically presented prose. In this passage 'woe' expresses a denouncing of behaviour as well as dismay and grief over what has happened. The 'evil' (rā'â) that they plan at night and carry out as soon as an opportunity presents itself is described in verse 2. We find a similar denunciation in Micah's contemporary, Isaiah:

Woe to you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!
YHWH of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
Surely many houses shall be desolate,
large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant.

– Isaiah 5:8-9

Micah joins Isaiah in denouncing the forcible eviction of people from their rightful inheritance by those with the power to do so. The word 'covet' (ḥmd) in verse 2 (as in Deuteronomy 5:21 in the tenth commandment of the Decalogue) speaks of desire that drives a person to action.

If they can plan evil against the weak, YHWH can plan evil against them (verse 3). Seizure of land and property could happen only with the connivance of those in authority. YHWH's judgment goes beyond the individuals who have actually committed the crime. Micah's use of the word 'tribe' may indicate that his concern included the seizure of land that was part of the constant skirmishes between the northern and southern kingdoms at the time (see 2Chronicles 28).

Verse 4 begins with what an individual speaking on behalf of those whose properties have been unlawfully seized will do on the day when YHWH's judgment comes into effect. The verse continues with words he has already uttered, crying out against the injustice of whoever it was who utterly ruined him and those he represents by seizing the property that is a sacred part of his tribal inheritance, and parcelling it out to their ruthless cronies.

Verse 5 speaks of the final result of YHWH's punishment. We already know that those responsible for seizing land will be evicted from the land they seized. Now we are told that they will have no say in what happens to their own land, as they will be excluded from 'the assembly of YHWH'.

One thing is clear: Micah is confronting rival prophets for their role in the injustices that were going on. This is not something new. From 1Kings 22 we know of a clash between Micaiah and Zedekiah. From Jeremiah 28 we know of Jeremiah's clash with Hananiah. Isaiah (28) and Hosea (4:5; 9:8) were opposed by other 'prophets'.

However it is not easy to be confident in translating the Hebrew text here (as in 1:10-16). At times, one could be forgiven for thinking that Micah is purposely imitating the nonsensical utterances of the so-called 'prophets' he is attacking. There are risks in translators attempting to make everything clear for the reader, especially when this is done by altering the Hebrew.

In verse 6 we hear Micah's rivals telling him not to preach (compare Amos 2:12). They preach, but they 'will not preach of such things': the kind of things we have just heard Micah preaching in verses 1-5. They 'know' that YHWH will not withdraw and bring shame upon Israel. In verse 7 Micah appeals to the 'house of Jacob'. Should the false prophets be saying what they are saying in verse 6? Instead of being so sure of themselves, they should have considered that YHWH has run out of patience and won't put up with injustice any longer. They should have asked themselves whether perhaps what Micah has just said in verses 1-5 could, indeed, be the word of YHWH. Verse 7 ends with what appears to be Micah's rebuttal. When he claims to 'walk with the upright', is he thinking also of walking with the Upright (YHWH)?

In verses 8-9 Micah goes on the attack, denouncing the actions of his rivals (represented by the 'he' of verse 8): their involvement in maltreating the poor, the strangers, the widows, the orphans and the war refugees. When he says 'my people', and 'my glory', he is consciously speaking for YHWH.

It is not clear who is speaking in verse 10, or whom the speaker is addressing. If Micah is speaking, he is trying to get rid of the false prophets. They are a source of corruption. In verse 11 he exposes what they are really up to. 'This people', that is, those who are involved in the injustices Micah is denouncing, are happy to have these phoney prophets, who say what they want to hear, as long as the bribe is right.

6“Do not preach!”— thus they preach. They will not preach of such things! He will not withdraw, causing us shame! 7Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Is YHWH's patient spirit exhausted? Are these his doings? Did not my words do good to one who walks with the upright?

8And yesterday he stood up against my people as an enemy; you stripped off the robe from the peaceful, from those who were passing through trustingly, returning from war. 9The women of my people you drove out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you took away my glory forever.

10Arise and go away; for this is no place to rest. Because of uncleanness that has corrupted. What a grievous corruption! 11If someone comes along pretending to be a 'man of the spirit' and telling lies (but what he really means is "I will preach for you for wine and strong drink"), such a one would be the preacher for this people!

¹²I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in Bozrah, like a flock in its fold; it will resound with people [‘in Edom’?].

¹³The one who breaks out went up before them; they broke through and passed through the gate, going out by it. Their king went through ahead of them, YHWH at their head.

We need not be surprised to find these words of hope wedged in between oracles that speak of doom. A prophet who sees the injustices that cry out to heaven should not be expected to forget to keep his eyes on YHWH, who has committed himself to keep offering life and salvation.

The image of a god as a shepherd and the people as a flock is found outside the world of the Hebrew Bible, and commonly in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Isaiah 40:1; Ezekiel 34:11-16; Psalm 23).

Bozrah was an ancient seat of government in Edom (see Genesis 36:33; Amos 1:12; Isaiah 34:6; 33:1).

So many will be involved in the restoration that it will be a very noisy fold indeed – noisy ‘with people’(m’dm), or perhaps ‘in Edom’(m’dm).

Verse 13 continues the promise of restoration. The image shifts from gathering sheep to leading an army. YHWH will lead them home as their conquering king.

After the difficulties of interpreting the quickly moving poetic text in chapters 1-2, chapter 3 comes as a relief. Andersen and Freedman in their commentary in the Anchor Bible Series (2000, page 345), speak of chapter 3 as ‘an excellent specimen of eighth-century prophetic discourse’.

The leaders condemned by Micah in verses 1-4 had the responsibility of seeing that justice was done in the community. They should have known YHWH’s judgment and should have seen that it was carried out. Instead, their basic attitude is summarised by Micah as ‘hating good and loving evil’. Their criminal behaviour is described in verses 2-3 as cannibalism. The metaphor is a powerful one: they feed off the poor (see 2:2).

The punishment for their crimes has been stated in 2:3-5. Verse 4 here assures them that there will be no let up. YHWH, who hears the cry of the poor, has paid no attention to their cry and refuses to be present to them.

In verses 5-8 Micah turns his criticism back to the false prophets (see 2:6-11). Micah accuses the prophets of involvement in extortion (‘put the bite on’). They declare that all is well (‘peace’) when confiscation of property is rife (2:1-5) and those responsible for justice deny judgment (3:1). If they are not paid they stir things up by declaring that YHWH is calling for war.

Micah’s threat is that the prophets who claim to have visions and to be able to divine the will of God will be discredited. Their claimed ‘visions’ and their ‘divining’ will not shed light, ‘for there is no answer from God’.

In verse 8 Micah claims an authenticity that the prophets lack. The key difference is that he is committed to the truth, and cannot be bought. He is not afraid to name rebellion and sin, whatever the consequence for himself. Unlike the false prophets who have allied themselves with those who wield power in the institution, he is ‘filled with power’, the power of ‘the spirit of YHWH’.

¹And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know the judgment? ²Hating good and loving evil; and their flesh from their bones;

³who have eaten the flesh of my people, and have flayed their skin off them; and their bones are broken, and they chopped them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron.

⁴Then they cried out to YHWH, but he did not answer them; he hid his face from them at that time, because they acted wickedly.

⁵Thus says YHWH concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who put the bite on with their fangs, who cry “Peace”, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths.

⁶Therefore night to you, from vision, and dark to you, from divination. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; ⁷the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners confounded; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.

⁸But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of YHWH, with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his rebellion and to Israel his sin.

⁹Hear this, you rulers of the House of Jacob and chiefs of the House of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity. ¹⁰He who builds Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!

¹¹Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon YHWH and say, "Surely YHWH is with us! No harm shall come upon us."

¹²Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Micah expands his attack to include all who abuse their power and are responsible for the rampant injustice afflicting the people. If verse 10 is speaking of the king, he is included in the condemnation, along with those responsible for administration, the priests and the prophets (verse 11). They are all responsible for the devastation that is to come down upon Jerusalem (verse 12). Verse 12 is quoted a century later in defence of Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 26:18).

Ahaz was involved in a lot of building in Jerusalem. 2Chronicles 28:3 recounts him following a dreadful practice of neighbouring lands in sacrificing his sons. Is this the 'blood' Micah is speaking of in verse 10? Or is the blood the lives of those whose property has been unjustly confiscated?

* * * * *

We have come to the end of what has been called 'the Book of Doom' (Micah 1-3). In 1:1 we were told that the word of YHWH given to Micah was 'concerning Samaria and Jerusalem'. The judgment upon Samaria came first (1:5-7). 3:12 speaks of the judgment of Jerusalem. The judgment against Samaria was partly fulfilled by the successful siege begun by Shalmaneser V in 724, and completed by Sargon in 721. However, the city was captured, not destroyed as one would expect from Micah's words. This suggests that Micah's oracles predated 724.

His threats against Jerusalem were not fulfilled. Jeremiah 26:18 attributes this to the fact that Hezekiah heeded Micah's words and so Jerusalem was given a reprieve by YHWH.

Apart from the very general opening verse, the Micah scroll is completely lacking in providing context for his oracles. A good argument can be mounted for placing them before 724. A likely context is the years of conflict between Israel and Judah in the final years of Jotham's reign and at the beginning of the reign of Ahaz (734-732).