

Micah 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Micah chapter 6. Hear what the Lord says. Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel. O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you?

Answer me, for I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember what Balak, king of Moab, devised, and what Balaam, the son of Beor, answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord. With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, 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? The voice of the Lord cries to the city, and it is sound wisdom to fear your name. Hear of the rod, and of him who appointed it. Can I forget any longer the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is accursed? Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales, and with a bag of deceitful weights?

Your rich men are full of violence. Your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth. Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins. You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be hunger within you. You shall put away, but not preserve, and what you preserve I will give to the sword. You shall sow, but not reap. You shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil. You shall tread grapes, but not drink wine. For you have kept the statutes of Omri, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and you have walked in their councils, that I may make you a desolation, and your inhabitants a hissing. So you shall bear the scorn of my people. Micah chapter 6 begins with a covenant indictment that the Lord brings against the people, with the mountains and the hills summoned as witnesses. In Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 1, the heavens and the earth are summoned as witnesses for the song of Moses. Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. The summoning of the mountains and the hills gives a sense of how serious the Lord's indictment is. However, where we might have expected the Lord to open with a searing declaration of his people's guilt, he actually invites his people to bring forth evidence against him. He's looking for some evidence, any evidence, to support their behaviour towards him.

Was he unfaithful to them in some respect, or did he needlessly burden them? He recounts what he did for them. He led them out of slavery in the Exodus, the great founding event of the people, the event upon which everything else rested. He provided them with gifted leaders, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Moses and Aaron are mentioned as a pair in 1 Samuel chapter 12. Psalm 77 verse 20 declares, You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. This verse is surprising for including Miriam alongside them. Miriam, of course, was the sister of Moses and Aaron. She was involved in Moses' deliverance as an infant. She also led the women in song in Exodus chapter 15. This passage is reminiscent of Joshua chapter 24 verses 5 to 10.

[3 : 44] And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out. Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. And when they cried to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them.

And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt, and you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam, the son of Beor, to curse you. But I would not listen to Balaam. Instead, he blessed you. So I delivered you out of his hand. As in Joshua chapter 24, Micah singles out Balak's attempt to curse Israel as a significant instance of the Lord's deliverance of them.

Reflecting upon the Lord's faithfulness to and deliverance of them in their history should spur them to current faithfulness. The reference to from Shittim to Gilgal presumably relates to the crossing of the Jordan, another signal event of deliverance, also referenced in Joshua chapter 24. The prophet then takes up the question of what renders a person or people fit to enter into the presence of the Lord. Many would think that what the Lord most wanted was great numbers of sacrifices, perhaps burnt offerings of the finest animals, offering the whole animal to the Lord rather than just having a sacrificial meal. How about multiplying sacrifices countless times over, perhaps even like the sacrifices with which Solomon dedicated the temple?

Maybe the more generous and extravagant libations of oil would do it. If that weren't enough, perhaps the worshipper should offer his own firstborn child for his sin. Would that be sufficient?

A common and important theme in the prophetic literature is the critique of mere ritual sacrifice apart from covenant faithfulness. 1 Samuel chapter 15 verse 22. Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. Isaiah chapter 1 verse 11. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. And in verses 16 to 17 of that chapter, wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. So what then does the Lord require of someone? Micah's answer here is reminiscent of Hosea chapter 12 verse 6. So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God. Also of Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 12 to 13.

[6 : 56] And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good. There are also similar statements in places like Psalm 15, answering the question of the sort of persons that will enter into the Lord's presence. The first requirement is a commitment to justice.

A mere negative avoidance of injustice is not enough. There should be a desire to address injustice more broadly and to bring justice as a positive condition. Loyalty or kindness is the second requirement, here described as something that the faithful worshipper must love. Such loyalty must be manifested in relationship with God, but also in relationships with one's neighbours. Loyalty extends itself towards others. Justice by itself can become harsh very easily, just as kindness by itself can be lacking in justice's orientation towards truth, but tempered with kindness, it can be a beautiful thing. The final requirement is to walk humbly with God. This is at the heart of it all. Where this is lacking, all else starts to become disjointed and hollow. True worship is not just ethical, the performance of moral deeds. Rather, true worship is at its very core a heart set upon the Lord, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. This is what the Lord looks for and desires from us.

Anything less is not enough for the worship of our maker. In verse 9, Micah acts as the herald of the voice of the Lord. The Lord is speaking and all should be summoned to attention. The second half of the verse, translated as hear of the rod and of him who appointed it in the ESV, could also be read as Leslie Allen suggests, as a summons to attention for a group of people. Listen, tribe and assemble citizens.

If the first reading is correct, it's a reference to the Lord's punishment and of the one who ordained it. In the second case, it's presumably addressed to Judah at a time when the people would have been assembled together. In verses 10 to 12, there are three key indictments of the people. The indictment focuses upon stealing, deceit, lying and false measures. As in the book of Amos, the rich of the land are here condemned for their predatory dealings with the poor. Their riches are gained through falsehood, oppression and injustice. And the more that they gather, the more that those riches testify against them to the Lord. The Lord promises as their sentence and judgment that he would make them desolate for their sins. Verses 14 and 15 give us curses of futility, similar to those found in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verses 38 to 41 in the curses of the covenant. You shall carry much seed into the field, and shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them. You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. You shall father sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity. Although Micah is addressing people in the southern kingdom of Judah, they are accused of keeping the statutes of Omri and the works of the house of Ahab.

This might seem strange until we consider that the influence of the Omrides has spread to the south as the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, Athaliah, had married King Jehoram. To secure his reign, Jehoram had killed six of his brothers, and through Athaliah, all sorts of idolatry and other pagan influences came into the nation. Athaliah herself had reigned as a usurper and tried to establish the worship of Baal in the southern kingdom. Those who followed in the path of the Omrides, however, would be cut off, they would be made desolate, and they would be scorned by those who were faithful.

[10:56] A question to consider, how does walking humbly with our God help us to do justice and to love kindness?