

Micah 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Micah chapter 2. Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds. When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away.

They oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, against this family I am devising disaster, from which you cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster. In that day they shall take up a taunt song against you, and moan bitterly, and say, We are utterly ruined. He changes the portion of my people.

How he removes it from me. To an apostate he allots our fields. Therefore you will have none to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the Lord. Do not preach, thus they preach. One should not preach of such things. Disgrace will not overtake us.

Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Has the Lord grown impatient? Are these his deeds? Do not my words do good to him who walks uprightly. But lately my people have risen up as an enemy.

You strip the rich robe from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. The women of my people you drive out from their delightful houses. From their young children you take away my splendour for ever.

[1 : 18] Arise and go, for this is no place to rest, because of uncleanness that destroys with a grievous destruction. If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, I will preach to you of wine and strong drink, he would be the preacher for this people.

I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob. I will gather the remnant of Israel. I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude of men.

He who opens the breach goes up before them. They break through and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king passes on before them, the Lord at their head.

The prophet Micah lived during a period of socio-economic change and spoke directly to the oppressive and exploitative realities of his day. In Micah chapter 2 he condemns oppressive landowners.

His message in this chapter begins with a statement of woe, an alas, as it were, declaring the doomed status of the people. Their injustice, Micah declares, is deep-rooted within them and is not just an accidental or unintended feature of their society.

[2 : 24] It springs up from and reveals the hidden intentions of their hearts. They never rest from their injustice. They ruminate upon it on their beds, and they are eager to get back to its performance when the morning comes.

One of the concerns of the Mosaic law was to ensure that families retained their possession in the land. The land was a source of economic security. It was a patrimony that bound people to their place and supported the continued life of the family and the community.

It was also a token of the people's membership of the people of the Lord, who had been given the possession of the land as a sign of his love. One of the purposes of the Jubilee, for instance, was to ensure that people were not alienated from their ancestral lands, and that people's position in the land did not become precarious.

More generally, the law was designed to discourage the establishment of a gulf between rich landowners and a poor landless class. Economic practices were tempered by prohibitions on usury and predatory dealings.

We see some of the economic principles of the law expressed at more length in places like Leviticus chapter 25 verses 23 to 42. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine.

[3 : 36] For you are strangers and sojourners with me, and in all the country you possess you shall allow a redemption of the land. If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.

If a man has no one to redeem it, and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, let him calculate the years since he sold it, and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property.

But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a year of its sale. For a full year he shall have the right of redemption. If it is not redeemed within a full year, then the house in the walled city shall belong in perpetuity to the buyer.

Throughout his generations it shall not be released in the jubilee. But the houses of the villages that have no wall around them shall be classified with the fields of the land. They may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee.

[4 : 45] As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites may redeem at any time the houses in the cities they possess. And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a city they possess shall be released in the jubilee.

For the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel. But the fields of pasture land belonging to their cities may not be sold, for that is in their possession forever.

If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God that your brother may live beside you.

You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave. He shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee.

[5 : 49] Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt.

They shall not be sold as slaves. In Micah's day, however, larger landlords were buying up lots of small farms, stripping vulnerable landowners of their ancestral possessions, reducing them from the owners of land and means of production to a more dependent class of unemployed persons or poor labourers on others' property.

Micah's contemporary Isaiah describes the same situation in Isaiah chapter 5 verses 8 to 10. Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.

The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing, surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah.

While the economic system and the situation allowed for such accumulation of land in the hands of a few, this was an abomination to the Lord. It was a practical denial of the fact that the land was his, and that he desired all of his people to enjoy its goodness.

[7 : 04] The rich were supposed to treat the poor as their brothers and sisters in the land, and not to seek to profit upon the back of their losses. All were supposed to act as faithful and responsible stewards of the land, recognizing their indebtedness to the goodness of the Lord, and their responsibility to their neighbors.

They were, as Leviticus chapter 25 teaches, to think of themselves as strangers and sojourners with the Lord himself. Leslie Allen reminds us of the story of King Ahab and Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings chapter 21, as an example of an attempt to take over people's ancestral land.

Micah declares that these oppressive landowners will receive their just desserts. The Lord will act against them, stripping them of their possession in the land, and rendering them an object of derision.

Verses 4 and 5 seem to relate to the practice of reallocating lands in a particular tract by Lot. The rich had sought to remove the poor from their portion and stake in the land, and so the rich themselves would suffer the same fate as they had sought to inflict.

They would be uprooted from their territory, and left without any stake of their own. Micah's message was not a popular one. It should come as no surprise to us that in speaking out against the rich and powerful in his land, like several of the other prophets, Micah invited opposition and resistance.

[8 : 25] Micah's words specifically address the wealthy landowners, but the immediate resistance he faced, described in verses 6 and 7, seems to come from false prophets, who opposed Micah's message and his challenge to the rich and powerful in the land.

Verses 6 and 7 are difficult to translate and interpret. It isn't entirely clear who is speaking at various points, nor is it clear exactly what is being said. Micah's opponents begin by commanding that he not preach.

Different commentators divide up the verses that follow in different ways, though. Alan, for instance, translates the verses as follows. Stop your preaching, they preach. They should stop preaching in this vein.

Humiliation won't overwhelm us. The community of Jacob is party to the covenant. Has Yahweh lost his temper? Is this the way he acts? Do not his promises spell good fortune?

Do we not keep company with one who keeps his word? He attributes almost all of the words to Micah's opponents. James Mays does much the same. John Goldingay, however, cuts off the opponents' words halfway through verse 7.

[9 : 30] Kenneth Barker's reading are similar, but he sees the opening line in verse 7 as introducing a second reported statement of the opponents, rather than itself being part of it. Joanna Hoyt restricts the words of the opponents to the very beginning of verse 6 and the middle lines of verse 7.

Their opposition to Micah is reminiscent of Amaziah's confrontation with Amos in Amos chapter 7 verse 16. Do not prophesy against Israel and do not preach against the house of Isaac.

Micah does not seem to be alone in his message. We've already noted that his contemporary Isaiah presented the people with a similar challenge on this front. The opponent's imperative to cease from preaching is a plural one.

Micah's opponents seem to resist his message on the grounds that it ill accords with the positive way that the Lord treats his people within the covenant. Micah's message is entirely too negative and judgmental and ends up putting the long-suffering and gracious God in a bad light.

One can imagine such a message being very compelling to many of their contemporaries. Besides the way that it can be expressed in a very pious way, it has the advantage of not being awkward and confrontational.

[10 : 38] It's far more congenial a message to the movers and shakers in Judah's society. Presumably the rich men of Judah were also wealthy patrons of these prophets who were concerned not to bite the hand that fed them.

They were obliging and flattering chaplains, wary of rocking the boat, not faithful prophets. Micah proceeds to speak directly to some of the sins that the false prophets were papering over.

The situation described is likely one of oppression through vicious use of the law, but the villains are described like bandits and enemy warriors, viciously despoiling a vulnerable people.

Under the rubric of the Eighth and the Ninth Commandments, against stealing and bearing false witness against one's neighbour, the law addressed abuses of power structures and systems of justice and economics, which were most likely the primary mechanisms of oppression here, as the wealthy and powerful used that power and the economic and legal systems as means of predation upon the poor, indebted and vulnerable, rather than seeking to protect them from expropriation and providing charity for them.

Their cruelty is underlined in verse 9. Like a military force, they seek to expel widows and orphans from their houses and their heritage for their own selfish gain. Their crime, however, is not merely against the vulnerable poor.

[11 : 53] They are stripping from the vulnerable poor what the Lord himself has given to them, thereby offending more directly against him too. The verdict against these oppressors is clear.

They have polluted and destroyed the Lord's good land with their injustice, undermining the grace that grounded the people's presence within it. Consequently, they would be expelled from it as unfit to dwell within it.

As they had evicted widows and orphans, the God who protects the defenseless poor would evict them. The Lord's indictment against Micah's opponents is sharp and direct. They are like those who prophesy of the blessings of wine and of intoxication, flattering the people that the Lord will establish their good and rendering them insensible to the looming disaster.

This does not mean that Micah's message is devoid of hope. Although verses 12 and 13 seem to represent a different oracle, likely from a different time, perhaps around 701 BC and the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib, it illustrates positive dimensions of Micah's message.

There is a hope of restoration after judgment, although it does not seem to be directed at the rich oppressors and false prophets to whom the earlier parts of this chapter were addressed. The Lord will gather a remnant of his people, even amidst the crisis, perhaps in Jerusalem itself.

[13:10] This might relate to the people of the land taking refuge in Jerusalem, as Sennacherib of Assyria swept through the land. There will, however, be deliverance and triumph. The Lord will lead the people out to repossess the land.

He will be at their head. He is their God, and they are his people. A question to consider. What might have been some of the forces encouraging the false prophets in their unfaithfulness?

