

Micah 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Micah chapter 3. And I said, Hear, you heads of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel. Is it not for you to know justice, you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones, who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a pot, like flesh in a cauldron? Then they will cry to the Lord, but he will not answer them.

He will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil. Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry, Peace, when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths.

Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them. The seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame. They shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin. Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice, and make crooked all that is straight, who build Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets practice divination for money. Yet they lean on the Lord and say, Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.

Therefore 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 chapter 3 contains three oracles, verses 1-4, 5-8, and 9-12. These three oracles are bound together, as Leslie Allen suggests, by a common theme of justice. Although dating the oracles of Micah with certainty is difficult, and it is likely that, as in other prophetic books, they are out of chronological sequence at various points, being ordered more according to literary, theological, and thematic principles, we do have an external reference that helps us in dating material in this chapter. In Jeremiah chapter 26, verses 17-18, we have a reference to verse 12 of this chapter, which places it during the reign of King Hezekiah.

And certain of the elders of the land arose and spoke to all the assembled people, saying, Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah, Thus says the Lord of hosts, Zion shall be ploughed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. The first oracle is addressed to the rulers and officials of the people, and the words here are Micah's own. Allen notes that since the oracles of this chapter seemingly date to the period of King Hezekiah, Jacob and Israel here must refer to the southern kingdom, as the northern kingdom had already been wiped out by the Assyrians.

[3 : 06] The task of the judges, officials, and rulers of the people was to know and to execute justice, acting as the representatives of the Lord. However, so far were these men from knowing and wanting to execute justice that they hated the good and loved the evil. The actual performance of justice requires a posture of heart towards that which is evil and that which is good, hating the evil and loving the good. This is described in Amos chapter 5 verse 15, in the charge that's given to the people there. Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. Wicked rulers are condemned for their perverted hearts in Isaiah chapter 5 verse 20. Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

Following on from the preceding chapter, we get a clearer sense here of the structures of oppression. The rich landowners were taking advantage of the precarious state of the poor and removing them from the land. The false prophets were covering for them with their flattering words and the unfaithful judges were turning a blind eye or even aiding and abetting them through their failure to execute justice. Micah describes these leaders in the most arresting imagery. They are savagely tearing his people apart and butchering them like meat to be consumed. He closely identifies with the victims of these evil rulers. He speaks of them as his people. These wicked officials and rulers had closed their ears to the distress of the people. Now the Lord would close his ears to their cries in the day of their distress. This is an instance of the principle described in Proverbs chapter 21 verse 13.

Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered. The second oracle addresses the false prophets. This time the words are those of the Lord himself.

The task of the faithful prophet was fully and fearlessly to declare the word of the Lord. These prophets, however, were flatterers and mercenaries. Their messages were designed to line their pockets rather than truthfully to communicate the word of the Lord. They would weaponize and adulterate the word of the Lord for their own gain, presenting divine approval as contingent upon people's willingness to give money to them. The wealthy clients who funded them would receive flattering words, while any who failed to do so would receive messages of condemnation, judgment, and doom.

In such a manner, they would have brought dishonor upon the word of the Lord and would have caused people to distrust prophets more generally. These prophets would face the darkening of their vision as a result, putting them to shame. The prophets do seem to enjoy some measure of genuine insight, but that would soon be denied them in a way that put them to a more open shame, revealing them to be charlatans. They had, like Balaam, perverted actual gifts for their own gain and would suffer judgment accordingly. Against the flattering falsehoods of the unfaithful prophets, the words of Micah are the real thing. As a prophet, he is anointed and filled with the Spirit of the Lord for his divinely appointed mission. His mission is that of declaring Israel's sin to it. He speaks with manifest power and with demonstrable justice. He isn't hiding any of the truth from the people or denying the issues. He speaks with candor and with courage. He unflinchingly addresses realities that others shrink back from, lest they jeopardize their income or their status. The source of the power and the courage that he expresses is the Lord himself. The third and final oracle of the chapter begins in verse 9. It's very similar to verses 1 to 4. It begins with the same sort of words. Hear this, you heads of the house of

[6 : 54] Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel. It's the same addressees. Once again, they are condemned for their hatred of justice and the way in which they pervert all that are straight. They systematically adulterate the truth and justice. The entire society of Jerusalem and of Judah by extension is built upon iniquity and injustice. Corruption is pervasive at its heart. The officials and judges pervert their judgments for bribes. Priests and prophets who should be committed to delivering the full counsel of the Lord to upholding the law and delivering his word of revelation are fueled not by faithfulness but by desire for material gain. And while doing all of this, they are presumptuous.

They believe that since the Lord is in their midst in Jerusalem, nothing terrible can befall them. We might here recall Jeremiah's temple sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 to 10.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amen your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known? And then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, we are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations. In chapter 1 verse 6, judgment had been declared upon Samaria for its sin. Therefore I will make Samaria a heap in the open country, a place for planting vineyards, and I will pour down her stones into the valley, and uncover her foundations. A similar sentence is declared upon Jerusalem here. She will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

A question to consider. In verses 2 and 3, Micah uses the imagery of butchery to describe the way that injustice has come to function within the land of Judah. Why do you think he chose this particular image? Why might it be an especially apt way of thinking about injustice and the way that it functions?