

Old Testament: Micah

Related Periods:

- Kingdom of Judah

Summary



Micah is one of the eighth-century prophets--a contemporary of Isaiah and a little later than Hosea and Amos. Like these other prophets, Micah speaks against false worship and for social justice. He proclaims harsh judgments against his own people (the nation of Judah) and is particularly offended by the leaders in business, government, and religion. Micah comes from a small town outside Jerusalem and addresses the centers of power as an outsider. He even boldly predicts the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem. The book also provides words of hope beyond the judgment.

So What?

Micah would be worth our attention for the three best-known passages (4:1-4; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8), even if the rest of the book, with its harsh judgments, were left unused (as is usually the case). Harsh words of judgment are not what most people crave to hear, but these too come to us in the prophets as the word of God. Micah's critique of preachers who say only what people want to hear and society's general reluctance to recognize that there are consequences to bad behavior make Micah's words an important message for our time as well as his own.

Where Do I Find It?

Micah is the thirty-third book in the Old Testament. It is the sixth of the so-called "minor" (or shorter) prophets, the twelve books that make up the final portion of the Old Testament.

Who Wrote It?

Micah wrote a good bit of what is contained in his book, but some passages, especially those that seem to be addressed to people who have already suffered a disaster, most likely come from a much later time.

When Was It Written?

Micah lived at the end of the eighth century B.C.E., about the same time as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. The earliest words from Micah seem to come just before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in

721 B.C.E. (1:2-7). Other parts of Micah appear to be written in the time of the Babylonian exile (after 586 B.C.E.) and later as some of the exiles returned home.

What's It About?

Micah is a book of judgment against God's people, mixed with words of hope that promise the possibility of renewal even after disaster comes.

How Do I Read It?

The prophetic books are often hard to read. Most have little or no narrative. They are a collection of messages from God to the people by way of the prophet. In Micah there are abrupt changes from condemnation to hope and back again that make it difficult to follow. Start with the three best-known passages (4:1-4; 5:2-5a; 6:6-8). Then pick and choose whatever section looks interesting, knowing that there is often no apparent continuity from one passage to the next.

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The book can be divided into three parts, each beginning with an imperative to hear or listen. Each section contains words of condemnation but ends with an expression of hope.

I. Coming Disaster and a Glimmer of Hope (Micah 1-2)

A. The Lord's Case against Israel (Micah 1:1-7)

After the editorial heading (v. 1), Micah gives reasons for the terrible fate soon to come to Israel and its capital, Samaria.

B. A Call to Lament (Micah 1:8-16)

Doom is soon to come to Judah also, and the appropriate response for both the prophet and the people is lamentation.

C. God's Judgment Will Fit the Crime (Micah 2:1-5)

God's judgment is not arbitrary or unjust. People have brought on themselves the exact judgment they deserve. Those who have taken other's property will have their own inheritance taken away.

D. Micah Confronts Preachers of False Assurance (Micah 2:6-11)

Preachers of false hope are at least partially responsible for Judah's fate because of their refusal to speak the truth. Instead of warning the people of impending danger, they have brought deceptive words of comfort.

E. A Word of Hope (Micah 2:12-13)

A word of hope seems out of place after all the terrible pronouncements of doom in these first two chapters. These words were probably added later to bring relief from all the condemnation and hope to a later generation.

II. Condemnation, Judgment, and Promise (Micah 3-5)

A. A Series of Oracles against Leaders (Micah 3)

Rulers, prophets, seers, and priests are singled out as major offenders and the ones responsible for God's

judgment against Judah. Even the holy city of Jerusalem will be destroyed (v. 12).

B. Mostly Words of Hope (Micah 4-5)

This section contains two of the best-known passages from Micah--the hope for a time when all nations will destroy their weapons and dwell in peace (4:1-4) and the promise of the new ruler from Bethlehem (5:2-5a).

III. From Judgment to Hope (Micah 6-7)

A. Introduction to God's Lawsuit against Israel (Micah 6:1-5)

God again makes the case that Israel fully deserves the punishment it will receive (similar to the beginning in 1:2-7). God is just--God has not broken the covenant; the people have.

B. What Does God Expect from Covenant Partners? (Micah 6:6-8)

In this often quoted passage, the people are reminded that they already know what God wants from them--not sacrifice, but justice, love, kindness, and a humble walk with God.

C. God Has No Choice but to Punish (Micah 6:9-16)

The Lord is a God of justice and cannot ignore the sins of the people. Therefore, judgment is inevitable.

D. Lament over the Terrible State of Society (Micah 7:1-7)

The prophet speaks a painful lament about how bad society has become. No one, not even friends and family, can be trusted. Such a nation cannot expect to survive.

E. A Closing Liturgy (Micah 7:8-20)

Scholars generally agree that this is a liturgy (with responses designed for public worship) and that it assumes an exilic or postexilic context. It is meant to help the people process the disastrous past and renew hope for the future.

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The prophet Micah came from the small town of Moresheth, southwest of Jerusalem. His message is intended primarily for the southern kingdom of Judah, though he also makes reference to the northern kingdom of Israel (the nation had split into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon around 920 B.C.E.). In his first oracle (1:2-7) Micah predicts the fall of the northern kingdom. That would date the beginning of his prophetic ministry before 721 B.C.E., when Samaria fell to the Assyrians. From that time on, only the southern kingdom of Judah remained, until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. Micah expected that Judah would follow the fate of Israel and predicted that Jerusalem, the holy city that God had chosen for the temple, would be wiped off the face of the earth. For those holding to the assurance that God would never break promises to protect king and temple, these words would have been a great shock, probably thought to demonstrate a lack of faith on Micah's part. Micah spoke harshly to prophets, seers, and priests who told people what they wanted to hear--the reassuring words of God's promises--and not the reality that Judah's fate could soon follow that of Israel.

Micah was wrong (or before his time) in his timing and exaggerated in his picture of the complete annihilation of Jerusalem--which, of course, like most Old Testament prophecy, is poetic in nature. Jerusalem was destroyed, but not until more than a century after Micah's time. And it recovered and has continued to survive as a city, even to the present day.

Though much of Micah's message warns about what is coming immediately, there are also passages of hope, probably directed later to the people who were in exile or returning from exile. Micah himself was more concerned about the immediate danger than the hope that would follow the catastrophe. But the book speaks to subsequent generations as well. For those who were living through the exile or later, Micah's prophecies of doom could help make sense of the destruction. This was God's justice after all. The words continued to serve as an ongoing warning that actions have consequences and that God's people should not again invite such disaster through actions of disloyalty and injustice.

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- **Difficulty of the text.** Though the Hebrew of Micah is generally fairly easy to translate, there are some passages that raise difficulties. The reader will be able to locate some of these passages when there is a footnote indicating that the "Hebrew is uncertain." For example, the list of towns in 1:10-16 is difficult to understand, though there is a play on words in the Hebrew that helps make some sense out of it. A couple of other difficult passages are 5:1 and 6:9-10.

- **Identity of Micah.** We know very little about Micah. There is no narrative about his activities. The heading in 1:1 tells us that he was from Moresheth, a small town southwest of Jerusalem. This, no doubt, gave him an outsider's view of what was going on in Jerusalem, unlike that of Isaiah and later Jeremiah who lived in the capital city. Micah was particularly critical of the leaders who were taking advantage of the ordinary citizens and bringing terrible tragedy to the whole nation. Though Micah left us no autobiography or account of his call, there are a few passages that might reveal something about his inner thoughts--for example, his own attitude of lamentation in 1:8 and 7:1-7.

- **Literary genres.** Micah used several different literary forms to shape his message of judgment. God has a lawsuit against the people (1:2-7 and 6:1-2) and will lay out the evidence to justify the punishment that will come. A typical prophetic oracle lists the offenses and then names the consequences (see, for example, 3:9-12). A call to lament (as in 1:8) is a way to drive home the awful reality of what is coming, even though it has not yet happened. The book ends with a liturgy (7:7-20), probably used in worship, with responses back and forth. Most of the hopeful oracles in the book are thought to be written at a later time than Micah himself, who had more interest in warning of disaster than assuring of hopeful days to come.

- **Unity of the book.** It is highly unlikely that the entire book of Micah was written by the prophet Micah. There has been considerable debate about this and some difference of opinion regarding specific passages. It is too simplistic to assume that all words of warning are from Micah and all words of hope are from a later time, added to reassure people in exile or recovering from the exile experience. Yet, there are good reasons to move somewhat in that direction. Perhaps Micah did speak words of hope that would transcend his dominant message of pending doom, but most of the book's promises of hope probably stem from a later time as the book was developed to address God's word to new situations. The most often disputed passages are in chapters 4-5 and 7:7-20.

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- **Acquiring God's favor.** How does one earn favor with God? Many have tried to do so by offering sacrifices of one kind or another. God makes it clear in an often quoted passage (6:6-8) that God is unimpressed by religious ritual, but wants people to be just, merciful, loving, and humble in their walk

with God.

- **Chosen people.** What does it mean to be God's chosen people? Does that bring immunity from the consequences of sinful behavior? Micah says no. God's promises of protection are not guarantees that apply regardless of the people's behavior.
- **Context for hope.** Is there a time when it is inappropriate to speak words of hope? False assurance will not make matters better. Rather, they may serve only to intensify denial of a reality that needs to be changed.
- **False prophets.** Micah severely criticizes those who preach and teach only what people want to hear, more concerned about preserving their paycheck than searching for God's truth. Throughout the Bible--as in our own day--the difficult task remains: to distinguish between true and false prophets.
- **God's control of all events.** Is everything that happens God's will? Do the Assyrians and Babylonians, who come to destroy the nations of Israel and Judah, know that they are acting on God's behalf to punish an unfaithful people? How does God's will connect with human freedom to sin? For the prophets, God moves actively in history, but the unfolding of events also depends upon human participation, for good or ill.
- **Justice of God.** When in exile, many asked questions about God's justice. The book of Micah wants to make the case that God is just and that there are good reasons for Israel and Judah to be punished. The people have brought their terrible fate on themselves. They are to blame, not God.
- **Leaders have special responsibility.** A whole nation can be dragged down by the actions of those who are supposed to be leaders. Merchants who cheat, political rulers who are more concerned for themselves than their people, religious leaders who cater to the wants of their constituents rather than the word of God--all of these contribute to the downfall of the ordinary citizen and the nation as a whole.

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