

Micah

Gwilym Pryce, October 2003

I. THE PROPHET HIMSELF

A. Author

The NIV Study Bible notes that “Little is known about the prophet Micah beyond what can be learned from the book itself and Jeremiah 26:18”. Actually, the reference in Jeremiah is interesting as it is an instance of Micah being cited by elders a century later as a prophet who brought a damning prophetic message, yet was not put to death for it by his contemporaries. If nothing else it shows that his message was well remembered! It is, in fact, the only time in Scripture where one prophet quotes another and includes a full citation (plagiarism was rife amongst Bible writers).

What we do know is that, “Micah was from the town of Moresheth (1:1), probably Moresheth Gath (1:14) in southern Judah. The prophecy attests to Micah's deep sensitivity to the social ills of his day, especially as they affected the small towns and villages of his homeland.” (NIV Study Bible). Ungers gives us a good summary of the timing of his prophecies:

“Micah was a native, apparently, of Moresheth (Mi 1:14), a Judean town near Gath, and at intervals a dependency of the Philistines. His prophetic ministry flourished in the reigns of Jotham (750-732 B.C.), Ahaz (c. 735-715), and Hezekiah (c. 715-686). He was a simple villager, but a prophet of social righteousness. Like Amos, the herdsman, he defended the cause of the poverty-stricken masses. Like Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah, Micah foretold the fall of the Northern Kingdom and the taking of Samaria (Mi 1:5-7), and he warned of the coming desolation of Judah (Mi 1:9-16). His prophetic oracles had special reference to Judah; nevertheless he envisioned all Israel (Mi 1:1,5-7).” (Ungers Bible Dictionary).

Though Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah, shared some of his grammatical traits (see below), and addressed a similar set of issues, he was coming at them from a very different social perspective. Some of the detailed descriptions he offers of injustice suggests that he had first hand knowledge or was a first hand witness of such events. Unlike Isaiah, he was not only a man who spoke to the people, but he was a man of the people:

“Although Micah's comments on Judean society strongly parallel those of his presumed contemporary and supplement them to a large degree, there is a pronounced difference in tone between the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah. Micah's is the voice of the countryside, of one who has empirical knowledge of the result of the evil policies that Isaiah, an aristocrat of Jerusalem, could only surmise, however much he wanted to empathize with the suffering of his compatriots. Micah was presumably from the common people, one who felt himself called on in that age of turmoil to speak in the name of Israel's God against evils that were no longer tolerable.” (Bruce Vawter, Oxford Companion To The Bible).

B. Style & Literary Characteristics:

A country boy, maybe, but Micah was no bumpkin. He was an accomplished and articulate writer/preacher:

"Micah's style is **simple; not rugged, but elegant**. He is plain-spoken in the rebuke of sin (i. 5; ii. 1, 2; vi. 10-12). His transitions of thought are often abrupt, but a logical connection is seldom difficult to discern. He is fond of the **interrogation** (i. 5; ii. 7; iv. 9; vi. 3, 6, 7, 10, 11), uses **irony** (ii. 11), introduces a **metaphor**, and retains it and carries it forward (i. 6; iii. 2, 3, 6; iv. 6-8, 13; vi. 10, 11, 14, 15), and delights in paronomasia or **play upon words**, employing it largely in the first chapter and perhaps allowing

it to determine the form of the concluding paragraph of the book. That paragraph is spoken in praise of Jehovah, and is based on the rhetorical question, "**Who is a God like unto thee?**" the prophet closing his prophecy by publishing the claim with its proud which his own name makes." (Davis Dictionary p.519).

"Micah's style is **similar to that of Isaiah**. Both prophets use vigorous language and many figures of speech; both show great tenderness in threatening punishment and in promising justice. Micah makes frequent use of plays on words, 1:10-15 ... being the classic example." (NIV Study Bible).

"Micah writes in simple yet eloquent language. He is outspoken and fearless in denouncing iniquity (cf. Mi 1:5; 2:1-2). He is logical in his development but often **abrupt in transition from one subject to another**. He makes considerable use of metaphor (Mi 1:6; I 3:2-3,6; 4:6-8,13; 6:10-11) and paronomasia, or play upon words (cf. chap. 1), and is fond of rhetorical interrogation (cf. Mi 1:5; 2:7; 4:9; etc.). He shows how God requires justice and loves mercy but requires these characteristics also in His followers." (Ungers Bible Dictionary).

C. Background and Date

Date

"The book of Micah is the sixth of the minor prophets. Its author prophesied in the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (i. 1). Its contents also show that it was written after the reigns of Omri and Aliab (vi. 16), at the time when Assyria was the power which the Israelites dreaded (v. 5, 6), and in part at least while Samaria and the northern kingdom were still in existence (i. 4); but how long before the fall of Samaria the words of i. 5-7 were uttered cannot be determined, for from the time of Uzziah and Jotham the prophets were foretelling the approaching doom of Samaria (Hos. i. 6; iii. 4; v. 9; Amos ii. 6; iii. 12; v. 1-3,27; vi. 1, 7¹¹, 14; Is. vii. 8, 9; viii. 4) and the 2-4, of Judah (Hos. v. 10)..." (Davis Dictionary Of The Bible p.519-520) .

Political Background

"The background of the book is the same as that found in the earlier sections of Isaiah, though Micah does not exhibit the same knowledge of Jerusalem's political life as Isaiah does. Perhaps this is because he, like Amos, was from a Judahite village. Israel was in an apostate condition. Micah predicted the fall of her capital, Samaria (1:5-7), and also foretold the inevitable desolation of Judah (1:9-16). Three significant historical events occurred during this period:

1. In 734-732 B.C. **Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria led a military campaign against Aram (Syria), Philistia and parts of Israel and Judah**. Ashkelon and Gaza were defeated. Judah, Ammon, Edom and Moab paid tribute to the Assyrian king, but Israel did not fare as well. According to 2Ki 15:29 the northern kingdom lost most of its territory, including all of Gilead and much of Galilee. Damascus fell in 732 and was annexed to the Assyrian empire.
2. In 722-721 **Samaria fell**, and the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria.
3. In 701 **Judah joined a revolt against Assyria** and was overrun by King Sennacherib and his army, though Jerusalem was spared."

(NIV Study Bible)

Note on Assyria:

Assyria started out as a sub region of Babylonia and remained so until the 14th Century BC when it became an independent state. Its power and influence grew until the death of Tukulti

Ninurta in 1208BC. After ruinous periods of decline and restoration it was not until the 8th and 7th centuries that it came to dominate the whole of the Middle East following a series of successful kings including Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib. The empire declined rapidly during the last quarter of the seventh century (627BC when the last great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal died). The sudden collapse of Assyria has baffled historians some suspecting civil war as an aggravating factor. (Pryce, based on Encyclopedia Britannica).

“Judah, by a combination of cynical statecraft, collaborationism, and religiously unacceptable compromise, would still be able to hold off the inevitable for a time; indeed, it outlasted the Assyrians only to become prey to their Neo-Babylonian successors. But this was done by the sacrifice of national and religious integrity, and in the end the result was the same, as Ezekiel (chap. 23) pointed out after the fact.” (Bruce Vawter, Oxford Companion To The Bible)

II. MESSAGE/OUTLINE

The Three Hears

The traditional breakdown of the book is along the lines of the three “hear” statements (The story goes, that like Spock from Star Trek, Micah had 3 ears: *he had a left ear, right ear and final front-ear*). Typical of this approach is the Davis Dictionary of the Bible (p.520) which notes that, "The expression "Hear ye," repeated three times, serves to mark the beginning of three divisions, each of which likewise ends with a message of hope." This results in the following supposed structure:

- I. Judgment upon Samaria (1:2- 2:13)
- II. Denunciations & Salvation (3:1- 5:15)
- III. Jehovah's controversy with the people as a whole not just the wealthy only (6:1ff).

When you read Micah, however, this imposed structure seems somewhat artificial and in fact the chapter breaks provide more reasonable guides. Ungers provides a reasonable alternative:

Ungers Outline of Micah:

I. Prediction of approaching judgment (1:1-2:13)

- Upon Samaria (1:2-8)
- Upon Judah (1:9-16)
- Upon cruel oppressors (2:1-11)
- Upon a remnant (2:12-13)

II. Prediction of the messianic kingdom (3:1-5:15)

- Preliminary judgments (3:1-12)
- Description of the kingdom (4:1-5)
- Establishment of the kingdom (4:6-13)
- Rejection of the King at His first coming (5:1-2)
- Interval between the royal rejection and return (5:3)
- The Messiah's second coming (5:4-15)

III. The divine controversy and final mercy (6:1-7:20)

- The people's ingratitude and sin (6:1-7:6)
- Prophetic intercession (7:7-20)

which is not dissimilar to that provided by the NIV Study Bible:

NIV Study Bible Outline of Micah:

- I. Superscription(1:1)
- II. Judgment against Israel and Judah (1:2-3:12)
 - A. Introduction(1:2)
 - B. The Predicted Destruction (1:3-7)
 - C. Lamentation for the Destruction (1:8-16)
 - D. Corruption in Micah's Society (2:1-11)
 - E. Hope in the Midst of Gloom (2:12-13)
 - F. The Leaders Condemned (ch. 3)
- III. Hope for Israel and Judah (chs. 4-5):
 - A. The Coming Kingdom (ch. 4)
 - B. The Coming King (5: 1-5a)
 - C. Victory for the People of God (5:5b-15)
- IV. The Lord's Case against Israel (ch. 6)
 - A. The Lord's Accusation (6:1-8)
 - B. The Coming Judgment (6:9-16)
- V. Gloom Turns to Triumph (ch. 7)
 - A. Micah Laments the Corruption of His Society (7:1-6)
 - B. Micah's Assurance of Hope (7:7)
 - C. Bright Future for God's People (7:8-13)
 - D. Victory for God's Kingdom (7:14-20)

We shall use the outline suggested by the Lion Handbook (p.498-499) which follows the chapter breaks:

1. The Tale of Two cities (1:1, 5)

Perhaps it would be more apt to say that the first chapter is a “tyrade against” rather than a “tale of” two cities. The book starts off by making it clear that God is rather angry to say the least with Samaria (1:6) and Jerusalem (1:12). The prophecy is not against these two cities alone, of course, but they are used to represent the Northern and Southern Kingdoms respectively. Micah’s warnings are as much to the rural villages (typified by the smattering of small villages mentioned in his prophecy, in one of which he himself probably had his birth and upbringing) as to the urban centres.

If the first chapter makes it clear that God is angry, the next two chapters explain why He is angry:

2. Exploitation

- *Looting and Robbery:* 2:1, 2, 8 indicate that there was no respect for property rights.
- *Exploitation of the weak:* 2:9

3. Misrule

- *Misrule by “Secular” Leaders* (3:1-3) the elders fail to govern justly.
- *Misrule by “religious” leaders* (3:5) the prophets mislead the people.

4. Future Greatness

- “In the Last Days” – when do the Last Days begin? (cf Peter’s quotation from Joel in Acts)
- Mountain of the Lord to rise above all other mountains – what does the mountain represent? (cf Christ’s parables about the Kingdom – what is the Kingdom)
- God’s mountain to be a resource for all other nations
- Even ill gotten gain to be captured for God’s glory (4:19b)
- Admired but still not understood (4:11)
- Universal scope:

"Micah addresses a small people in a strip of land merely about the size of Wales, yet in chapters i. 2 and vi. 1, 2, he commands the whole earth, the mountains, the hills, to attend (in Scripture usage mountains and hills frequently symbolise kingdoms). This is no mere rhetoric. Micah realised the covenant people were brought into their unique relationship with Jehovah so that through them the sovereignty of the true God, in its governmental administration among the nations, might be objectified to all peoples and for all time." (J. Sidlow Baxter p.193).

5. The King from Bethlehem

The glorious picture presented in chapter 4 of God’s Kingdom seems utopian compared to the current crisis. How will it happen? The people’s preoccupation (and that of much of the OT) seems entirely with their own problems and heritage, they are concerned with their narrow ancestral line, and their unique position in God’s plan. How are they to influence the ends of the earth?

- A King from Bethlehem would come (5:2)
- His origins are from “ancient” times (5:2) indicating his pre-existence
- Israel would seem abandoned until he comes
- He is described as a shepherd and a ruler
- His greatness would not be limited to Israel but would extend to the ends of the earth (5:4)
- Conflict with the nations would be ended because he himself would be their peace (4:5; cf Ephesians 2:2-18 – brought near through the “blood of Christ”).

6. Jehovah’s case against Israel

- The Lord has an accusation to make against Israel (6:1-2)
- What has the Lord done to deserve their apostacy (6:3-8)
- Dishonesty and corruption specified (6:9-16)

7. Darkness & Light

- The prophet’s/Israel’s misery and despair at what he/she sees (7:1-7)
- Israel declares that the Lord will be her light (7:8) and raise her up again
- “Who is a God like you?” – proclamation of the Lord’s goodness and mercy (7:18)

III. APPLICATION

We must Look beyond ourselves

- Micah was a parochial prophet with panoramic vision. He was a country boy, from a small town but he thought big thoughts.

- Whatever our background, our vision (if it is to mimic that of Jehovah) has to be universal in scope.
- Micah saw that what God had given Israel would go beyond Israel to “the nations” (a significant phrase). We are part of something much bigger than ourselves, part of a process we cannot stop (“God is working all things in conformity with the purpose of his will”). The Divine purpose is inexorable, so much bigger than us, yet we are intimately part of it – the Resoration of All Things.

Conflict between future glory (ch. 4) and present struggles

- Peace and dominion ahead, but sin and judgement in the present
- Like us, Micah switches between the two
- We face a similar dilemma, so we can learn from and be encouraged by Micah
- View the present in the light of the ultimate

Remember Our Humble Beginings

- The Great Paradox: Justice (short term vs 6:11) and Mercy (7:18-20). But how can God forgive if he’s righteous?
- How can we as Gentiles partake in God’s salvation plan?
- Christ Our Peace (cf Micah 5:5 with Eph) – removed the dividing wall of hostility
- Peace experienced vs peace established → Peace of God vs Peace with God
- You must have the latter before you can enjoy the former
- If you are troubled, are you trying to establish peace with/of God other than through Christ your peace?

Don’t become detached

- Micah was moved by the agony and oppression. He grew up amongst it – he was sheilded like the middle and upper classes of his day.
- Easy to forget the plight of those around us once we have our ticket to heaven & we’re enjoying God’s favour.

The practical steps of true religion

- Micah 6:6 "With what shall I come to the LORD And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? 7 Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to **do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?**"
- Compare this with James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."
- Time to build (Micah 7:11) – brick by brick, little by little, where you are, establish God’s Kingdom through faithfulness, humility and good works.

Right rule

- If you are in a leadership position (whether secular or spritual) govern with honesty and mercy (3:1,2) otherwise the day will come when God will not answer your prayer (3:4,7b). Note that God does not always settle his accounts at the end of the month – his present favour does not necessarily represent his sanctioning of all that we do (c.f. Samson – slep with a harlot at midnight and took up the gates of Gaza the next day).
- Let our leadership role model by that of Christ, not that of the current management trends of our day – we can learn from successful business men and management trends, but some are fundamentally unrightous, harmful and in stark contrast with the leadership role of Christ (e.g.

“macho management” – an inappropriate ethos given that God’s people are the fruit of the vision not fodder for the vision – God is as concerned with the process as he is the ends):

"Note, too, the solemn yet glorious significance of the contrast which Micah strikes by the unmasking of false rulership versus the unveiling of true rulership in Christ. God delegates authority and addresses the princes, priests, and prophets as the ordained representatives of the Divine administration. Their responsibility is commensurately great. See Micah's scathing indictment of false rulership in chapter iii. versus the arresting description of true "RULER," in chapter v., who was yet to come. Christ is God's ideal of rulership. Micah traces the perversion and adversity of the people to the misrule of those over them; and all who abuse such authority incur equal penalty. Let the rulers of today take heed!" (J. Sidlow Baxter p.193)