



An Introduction to the Book of Micah

Author and Title

Rather than being identified by his father or family, e.g. Joel describes himself as 'son of Pethuel' (Joel 1:1), and Jonah as 'son of Amittai' (Jonah 1:1), this prophet is identified by a location, 'Micah of Moresheth' (Micah 1:1). It was about 22 miles or 35 km southwest of Jerusalem in the lowland or Shephelah region. Unlike the calls to prophetic office of some other prophets, e.g. Isaiah 6:1-13 or Jeremiah Chapter 1, Micah's call is not recorded. Micah is never explicitly referred to as prophet, but the source of his power is explicitly attributed to the 'Spirit of the Lord' (3:8), as confirmed in 2 Peter 1:20-21. The name Micah may be translated as a simple rhetorical question: 'Who is like Yahweh?' Similarly, the book concludes with an inquiry: 'Who is a God like you?' (7:18). These questions underscore the unrivalled character and actions of the Lord.

Date

Micah prophesied during the reigns of the Judæan kings Jotham (750-735BC), Ahaz (735-715BC), and Hezekiah (715-687BC). The time span roughly parallels those of other 8th Century prophets like Hosea (Hosea 1:1) and Isaiah (Isaiah 1:1), although Micah 1:1's omission of the name of King Uzziah (767-739BC) may place Micah somewhat later. It is difficult to assess the length of Micah's public activity with any precision. At a minimum, the 16-year reign of Ahaz (2 Kings 16:2), in combination with the presumed transitions at the end of the reign of Jotham and the start of the reign of Hezekiah, provides a ministry length of 20 to 25 years. In Jeremiah 26:18 the elders of the land note the influence of Micah's words on Hezekiah by directly quoting Micah 3:12.

Theme

The theme of Micah is judgement and forgiveness. The Lord, the Judge who scatters his people for their transgressions and sins, is also the Shepherd-King who in covenant faithfulness gathers, protects and forgives them.

Purpose

Micah writes in order to bring God's 'lawsuit' against his people (3:8). He indicts Samaria and Jerusalem for their sins (1:2-7), with both Assyria (5:5-6) and Babylon (4:10) looming as instruments of the divine sentence.

Free from Assyrian interference in the first half of the 8th Century, the reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel (782-753BC) and the Judæan kings Uzziah and Jotham witnessed the emergence of a wealthy upper class. Yet this brought with it significant corruption. As Amos had condemned the economic and legal injustices prevalent in the Northern Kingdom in the first half of the 8th Century (Amos 2:6-7, 5:10-12 and 6:4-5), so Micah catalogues specific sins of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. These sins included idolatry (Micah 1:7 and 5:12-14); the seizure of property (2:2 and 2:9); the failure of civil leadership (3:1-3, 3:9-10 and 7:3), religious leadership (3:11), and prophetic leadership (3:5-7 and 3:11); the belief that personal sacrifice satisfies divine justice (6:6-7); and corrupt business practices and violence (6:10-12).

The reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, along with the increasing threat of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, provide the broad background for Micah. First, Ahaz stands out among the three Judæan kings for his idolatry (2 Kings 16:1-4 and Micah 6:16) as well as for the help he sought from the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (745-727BC) in the face of Syro-Ephraimite aggression against Jerusalem (2 Kings 16:5-9 and 2 Chronicles 28:16-21). Second, Samaria, the northern Israelite capital, experienced exile as it fell (2 Kings Chapter 17 and Micah 1:6-7) to the Assyrian Shalmaneser V (727-722BC). Finally, Sennacherib (705-681BC) captured numerous cities and villages of the Shephelah controlled by Hezekiah (1:10-16), but ultimately failed to capture Jerusalem in 701BC (2 Kings 18:13-19:37).

Key Themes

1. The character of the sovereign Lord and the sins of his people demand judgement. The sentence of God's 'lawsuit' comes in the form of an oppressor and by means of covenant curses (6:13-15) rendered for covenant unfaithfulness (6:16).
2. A Shepherd-King gathers and delivers a remnant. This deliverer, functioning as a new David, will come from the very region under Assyrian control.
3. Covenant faithfulness consists not merely in ritual but in the proper expression of the primary forms of love: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (6:8), as confirmed in Matthew 23:23.
4. The Lord is the focus of worship. The nations will no longer 'flow' to false gods, as confirmed in Jeremiah 51:44, but to Zion to learn of the true Lord and to live in peace (4:1-5 and 7:12), as confirmed in Isaiah 2:2-5.

5. The liberating light of grace flowing from the Lord's steadfast love (7:18-20) overcomes the ominous sentence due to sin (7:8-9). Forgiveness is grounded in God's faithfulness to his promises (7:20).
6. God's saving acts in the past (6:4-5 and 7:14-15) are interpretative analogies for his saving acts in the future (7:19-20).

History of Salvation Summary

In every age God wants his people to respond to his love by doing justice, practicing loving-kindness, and walking humbly with God (6:8). This is genuine humanness, and by it Israel was called to commend God's goodness to all mankind. Israel and Judah in Micah's day were corrupted by their refusal to embrace God's purpose, and thus would suffer judgement; but there would yet be a remnant who would experience God's forgiveness and be part of his plan to bless the world through the Messiah's rule.

Literary Features

Micah comprises a series of oracles or prophetic pronouncements delivered in a variety of historical and political contexts. The overall genre is prophecy. While Micah uses a variety of forms such as disputation (2:6-11) and lament (1:8-16), the two leading prophetic forms in Micah are the oracle of judgement (2:1-4), and the oracle of salvation or redemption (5:2-5). The oracles of judgement follow the rules of satire: they have one or more objects of attack, a vehicle in which the attack is embodied, a stated or implied norm by which the criticism is conducted, and a prevailing tone that is either biting or laughing. Some of the oracles of salvation picture a future golden age, which can be taken either as messianic visions of the First Coming of Christ or as apocalyptic visions of Christ's Second Coming. Much of the book's content is embodied in poetical language, requiring the reader to unpack the meanings of images and figures of speech such as wordplay, metaphor and simile.

The Near East at the Time of Micah (circa 740BC)

Micah prophesied to Israel and Judah during the decades just before the fall of Samaria through the time of King Hezekiah of Judah. Micah witnessed the destruction of Israel by the rising Assyrian empire, yet he probably also witnessed the Lord's dramatic rescue of Jerusalem from the Assyrians during Hezekiah's reign.



Regional Map

Outline

The current arrangement of the text permits a number of possible outlines. One that has garnered much support, and that is followed here, centres on the pattern of judgement and salvation found throughout the book. In each of three large units, the use of the plural imperative ‘hear’ begins a major section on judgement, and each unit moves toward hope and deliverance (1:2-2:13; 3:1-5:15; 6:1-7:20).

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. The Announcement of Judgement on Israel and Judah (1:2-2:13)
 - a. God’s Punishment of Samaria and Judah (1:2-16)
 - i. Judgement Pronounced against Samaria (1:2-7)
 - ii. The Doom of the Cities of Judah (1:8-16)
 - b. Social Evils Denounced (2:1-11)
 - i. Indictment and Future Punishment (2:1-5)
 - ii. Rejection of the Prophetic Word (2:6-11)
 - c. A Promise for the Remnant of Israel (2:12-13)

- III. The Present Injustice and the Future Prospect of Just Rule in Jerusalem (3:1-5:15)
 - a. Wicked Rulers and Prophets (3:1-12)
 - i. Judgement against the Heads of Jacob (3:1-4)
 - ii. Judgement against the Prophets (3:5-8)
 - iii. Judgement against the Heads of Jacob (3:9-12)
 - b. Jerusalem's Restoration among the Nations (4:1-5:15)
 - i. Peace and Security through Obedience (4:1-5)
 - ii. Restoration Promised after Exile (4:6-5:1)
 - 1. Divine promise to gather Zion (4:6-7)
 - 2. Restoration of Zion's Dominion (4:8)
 - 3. Nations Approach Zion for Battle (4:9-5:1)
 - iii. The Shepherd-King Arrives and the Remnant is Restored (5:2-15)
 - 1. The Ruler from Bethlehem (5:2-6)
 - 2. The Future Role of the Remnant (5:7-15)
- IV. The Lord's Indictment and Restoration of His People (6:1-7:20)
 - a. Israel accused: covenant violation (6:1-8)
 - i. God Challenges Israel (6:1-5)
 - 1. The Prophetic Summons (6:1-2)
 - 2. Divine Interrogation and Saving Acts (6:3-5)
 - ii. What God Requires (6:6-8)
 - b. Crisis in Relationship (6:9-7:7)
 - i. Cheating and Violence to Be Punished (6:9-16)
 - 1. Divine Indictment of Treachery (6:9-12)
 - 2. Divine Sentence for Treachery (6:13-16)
 - ii. The Total Corruption of the People (7:1-7)
 - c. Penitence and Trust in God (7:8-10)
 - d. A Prophecy of Restoration (7:11-17)
 - e. God's Compassion and Steadfast Love (7:18-20)